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Tales of the Human Kind

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The Undiscovered Country

By Lynn S. Hightower

Art by Carol Heyer

*The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns.*

— Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, 1

Siegel's chest rose laboriously. Sweat rolled off his face and neck, drenching the crumpled sheets. He bit down hard on his knuckles, keeping the scream in the back of his throat.

Hundreds of frogs hung on the mosquito netting. They oozed a tangy fish smell, and the net swayed under their weight. They stared at him with huge goggle eyes, their white throats bulbing with a chorus of croaking threats. Any minute the net would break and come down on his head.

He could feel the dark ones in the corner, hearing his thoughts. He would have to be careful.

Siegel leaped out of bed. The net trembled and thudded close to his face. He cried out and ripped his way through barehanded. Frogs dropped to the floor, croaking in distress, and he felt their fat bubble bodies splurt under his feet. He slipped in their blood.

He was up again in a second, but not soon enough. The ones in the corner leaped out of the shadows. Their heads made them look like huge black dogs, but their bodies were built like horses. One lunged and knocked him to the floor. Its eyes gleamed red — it wanted his heart. White froth dripped from its muzzle onto Siegel's bare chest. The heavy jaws clamped under his neck and ripped his flesh from shoulder to groin.

He screamed.

He screamed for a long time, barely aware that someone rocked him, cradled his head, held him in a grip of iron.

"Is okay, Siegel. Is okay. We go for the man in the morning."

"Saitoti?"

"Yes, my friend."

Siegel trembled hard and pushed the Masai warrior away. He looked at his bare chest. It gleamed with sweat, but he expected blood. There was none.

It took all morning for Siegel and Saitoti to walk two miles to the village. Siegel's dogs, Jack and Crispin, followed trails of their own — circling back, tails wagging, when Siegel whistled for them. Saitoti could have made the walk in fifteen minutes, alone, but Siegel liked to watch the animals, and the Masai was content to wait.

Siegel studied a herd of zebra, wondering if they were content just to eat, sleep, and lope through the grass. He watched for lions, but didn't see any. He loved their lazy smugness, the way they sunned their furry bellies in the late afternoon. He admired their dangerous competence, their dominance of their world.

Siegel smelled the smoke of a cook fire and saw the grouping of huts. Saitoti stopped walking.

"There."

Siegel kept going.

The Kikuyu stood in front of a hut set apart from the others. He moved slowly, with a deliberate grace that nevertheless gave pain to a body worn with age. Siegel had never seen anyone so old.

Saitoti caught up and touched Siegel's elbow.

"He is a religious man. Very wise."

Siegel frowned. "No hoodoo, my friend."

"He is the one they thought would die. He was old even then, and they took his bed outside for his bones to lie on. They thought he would not last the night. One of the men there swears he even stopped breathing."

"And then?"

"And then he breathed." Saitoti narrowed his eyes. "He wants to meet you."

"Me? The demon man from America?"

"He said to bring you when you were ready."

Saitoti walked across the hard-packed dirt to the hut. He had an arrogant, stiff-legged stride. His chin jutted forward belligerently. His hair was long, braided in a thick pigtail.

He was one of the few friends Siegel had ever had — a misfit, like himself. Saitoti had flinched and cried out during his circumcision ceremony, bringing shame to his family. Saitoti had never mentioned the incident, but had instead professed to be fascinated by white men. A cousin of his had been educated abroad — returning to the village for a few months, then leaving for good. The cousin had spoken of white men who ignored the moon, who built in old cities that should have been finished years ago. Saitoti expected odd behavior from white men. He had no problem with Siegel.

A few of the children skittered back and forth in front of Saitoti, but most hung back and stared. Siegel watched them. Kikuyu were often leery of Masai, but this was something more. Saitoti was feared, as he himself was feared. Guilt by association. His friendship had rubbed off.

Siegel tied the dogs securely and followed Saitoti into the hut. It was dark inside and thick with large, black flies. He could hear Jack and Crispin whimper.

Run, Siegel. Take off your shirt and burn rubber.

Siegel jumped, the voice loud in his ear. Saitoti and the old man stared at him. Siegel batted flies off his neck.

The old man smiled. Most of his teeth were gone. His hair had dwindled to a few grey tufts and in recompense his chest hair was heavy and grey. His eyeballs were yellowed, the rims bleary and red. The old man's skin, still rich in hue, hung flaccidly on his arms and belly.

"My name is Ahden."

"Ahden?" Siegel frowned, staring at the man's out-





stretched hand.

Ahden cocked his head. "You do not shake hands? I see white men do it all the time."

Siegel took the thick fingers carefully. Ahden had a strong grip, though the bones were brittle beneath the flesh.

"I never heard of a Kikuyu named Ahden," Siegel glanced at Saitoti, who had closed his eyes and seemed to be dozing.

"No, it is not Kikuyu. It is my real name. I like to hear it. I thought, between you and me, we would keep everything straight and ... Siegel, if you get any further away I'll have to talk loud. Someone outside might hear us. Some of the Kikuyu speak English."

The voice was threadbare with age, but the intonation and vibrancy were youthful. The contrast was strange.

Siegel inched forward.

"Thank you."

Saitoti opened his eyes and grinned maliciously at Siegel. "Tell him the story, Ahden."

Siegel shifted his right leg and tried not to fidget. Saitoti and Ahden were oblivious to the flies, but he wasn't.

The old man put a hand on Siegel's shoulder. "There is a place, worlds away from here, Siegel, where three planets revolve around a star that burns a harsh, bronze light. My home. We were very ... populous, once, and we scouted for new places."

"What we found was sickness, bad sickness. We died in the millions." The old man's voice was dry and thoughtful. "This is history, Siegel." He sat on the floor and crossed his legs.

"No one escaped. The few that lived still had the sickness and passed it to their children. Then they died, slowly, but they died. The children also died, but it took many years. And some of them had children."

"Finally, we were able to change, or the illness changed. I suspect both. We combined with our sickness, and in doing so, gained the ability of physical empathy. And that, Siegel, is the ultimate experience."

"Like sex? Or drugs?"

"No, Siegel." The man smiled. "We have learned to live through others. Physical empathy. It offers every possible experience. We can enter the body of any living creature, and become one with that being for as long as we wish. Then we move on."

"What happens to your victim?"

"Not victim, Siegel. We never enter a creature unless it is at the point of death. The creature completes its death. Its soul, as you call it, leaves, and we are in possession of the body and the memory imprints as long as we want."

"What if the creature doesn't want you?"

"Then we do not enter."

"What stops you from taking over a healthy person in his prime?"

"It is taboo. If we did so, we would not survive. Too much pirating creates chaos. It is hard for a being of morality to hurt a creature understood as completely as we understand. Think of it this way. If you hurt someone, and then become that person, you have hurt yourself."

Siegel caught Saitoti's watchful look. "Why tell me all this?"

"Saitoti says you have a demon in your head. He thinks

I should enter you, Siegel, and get rid of your demon."

Siegel took a deep breath. "Do you believe in demons, Ahden?"

"Yes. But you do not have one." Ahden cocked his head to one side. "I do not know what causes ... mind weakness in humans. But my mind, my will, is very strong. I am offering you coexistence. And a chance to escape the 'demon.'"

Siegel dug his fingernails into the earthen floor, packing dirt under the rims. His left thumbnail split.

"Are you saying that with you in my head, I'll be normal?"

"I think so. As normal as you can be with a companion mind." Ahden smiled gently. "It might be better than killing yourself."

Siegel's head jerked upward. He started digging the dirt back out of his nails. "What if it doesn't work out? Suppose I don't like having someone — you — in my head. Will you go?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"To the next experience. This ability has saved my people, but cursed us also. We are adventurers, hooked on experience."

"How do I know you'll leave if I want you to?"

"You will have to trust."

"This — hobby of yours. Must have some hellish side effects."

The old man quit smiling. "It has cost me more than you could imagine."

Siegel stood up, shaking his head thoughtfully.

"Think about it, Siegel."

He nodded. Saitoti followed him out of the hut. Siegel glanced back through the doorway at Ahden, but his eyes ached with the sunlight and he saw only shadows. He untied the dogs and walked out of the village, passing the old women bent double in the fields. His back ached in sympathy.

That night Siegel lay awake, thinking. Since his twelfth birthday he'd needed every ounce of concentration just to get through a day acting normal like everybody else. It was hard. His thoughts had a habit of escaping under the cracks of the baseboard in his room. For years he had thought he'd fooled his parents.

Then one night he had found himself in the kitchen. He didn't remember getting there. He was barefooted and in pyjamas with fresh mud stains on the knees. The house was hot. He opened the refrigerator, sighing at the blast of cold that hit his chest. As long as he was there, he might as well eat something.

There was a sticky spot on the linoleum and he hopped on one foot, examining the smear on his big toe. Pipe smoke drifted in the kitchen window, and he took a deep breath of the warm homey smell. The porch swing creaked and he heard the thunk of his father's pipe being knocked out on the wood rail.

"What does that mean, undifferentiated schizophrenia?" His father sounded strange.

His mother's voice went on a long time, low and insistent. He couldn't make out the words, but he recognized the comforting tones.

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God's Bullets

By Rory Harper

Art by Charles Lang

All right, vacuum suckers, that was the old, old classic 'All Along the Watchtower' by Jimi Hendrix, recorded more than a hundred years ago, and this is MOON-105, your Stroider station, home parabolics at Serendipity Central, synchronized repeaters all the way around the circle at 1.2 A.U. Next up, a new one that'll be climbing the charts real quick, you heard it first on MOON-105. This is 'Garbage Woman,' by Big Bad Lorenzo.

I was laid out with a light electrostatic charge clasp my palms and butt-cheeks to the hull, soaking up some sunlight. All relaxed and dreamy, photosynthesizing in low gear, watching the stars get older while I listened to the radio. I had gotten a good strong stereo signal from a repeater a couple million clicks Moonward. Most of the music from the last century is a whole lot better than most of the music from this century, as far as I'm concerned.

About a minute into the song, Lefty broke in. "Hey, Athena. Wake up; Maxthree just sampled a stroid with water in the spectrograph."

Good news. We'd been prospecting in the inner belt, way above the ecliptic, for five weeks, and hadn't found a thing worth investigating. Water wouldn't make us rich, but a good berg would pay the bills for awhile.

"Great! Wake me up when we get there."

"Sorry, pumpkin, it's off at a bad vector, headed in toward the Sun. It's already starting to cometize. I need to put on some serious delta if we want to intercept before it vaporizes completely. I'd rather not leave you behind."

Never argue with a guy who has his hands on the controls of a nuclear reactor. I decided I'd work on my tan some other time and crabbed over to the airlock. Even after being with Lefty for almost two years, I still needed to remember to pressurize before going into the cabin. Lefty was, perversely, a complete natural, except for his prosthetic hand. Oh, he had a surgically-implanted transceiver, but that was only because the law required it. Most importantly, he didn't suck vacuum even a little bit. Whenever I tried to talk to him about it, he always changed the subject.

A few seconds later I floated into the control room, which was also the living room, bedroom, and kitchen. Lefty had already slipped into the envelope covering the gimbal bed, so I strapped us both together and snuggled up to him. I bit his earlobe lightly.

"I missed you with a desperation you will find almost inconceivable," he said sincerely. He pulled me close with his real hand and kissed me while he stared into an overhead screen and finished Maxthree's burn program for rendezvous with the water stroid. One of the reasons I loved Lefty: he gave great snuggle, even when he was working.

He was running a direct program feed-check-and-modify through his prosthetic. Shortly, the bed swung into a new orientation as Maxthree rotated the ship. Then we settled, rocking slightly as the torch burned. In a minute, we were up to about three times lunar gravity.

Lefty unplugged his prosthetic from the computer and turned to me. He kissed me again, this time more attentively.

"I haven't been very good company lately," I said when we disconnected. "I'm sorry."

"I hadn't noticed," he said.

"Right. You didn't notice that I've spent practically all of last week outside."

"I thought you were busy scraping barnacles off the hull."

"Yeah."

"You needed to be alone. I understand that, pumpkin. I need it sometimes, too." He looked around the cabin. "Can't get much privacy in here, that's obvious."

"I really love rubbing up against you, though."

"Me, too. You decided yet whether you want to make it permanent?" About a hundred and twenty hours before, he had asked me to marry him. Shortly before I felt the urge to observe the dark a lot. Big coincidence.

"Not yet." I stared at the screen, watching the burn program run. I couldn't make myself look directly at him. "You know it's not you. I'm afraid that people I care about will leave me. Like Mom and Dad did."

He nodded. I hugged him closer. "I'm sorry," I said again. "It's not fair. I'm still so screwed up, after all these years."

He stroked my hair. "I know," he whispered. "Who isn't?"

Then we made love and held each other a long time.

We came up on the target stroid a couple of hours later. We both were napping when Maxthree chimed a couple of times to announce that we had established station a half a click from it. Lefty was sleeping deeper than I, so I pulled down the screen and took a look at the stroid. Just as I flicked the screen on, one of the beamers situated around the ship's waist fired at a bullet that Maxthree had decided was on a kamikaze vector. Bullets are rare this far above the plane of the ecliptic, but they still come at you occasionally. The screen fogged to compensate for the plasma flare, then cleared. It displayed a coherent tear-drop of white mist, glowing pearlescent against a backdrop of hard vacuum.

Inside the mist, the outlines of something more solid could be indistinctly discerned. The numbers bordering the screen display sized the stroid hidden in the mist at about three hundred meters on its semimajor axis and two hundred on the semiminor. The teardrop pulsed gently as ice vapor boiled into vacuum.

Its tumble rate was unusually low. Gradually, the other side spun into view. Apparently, part of the stroid had sheared off, leaving a flat plane. I blinked.

I shook Lefty, hard. He rolled over and sleepily opened his eyes. I nudged him and he looked at the screen. He lay unmoving for a few seconds.



"Son of a bitch," he finally whispered.

We could barely make it out. Lefty plugged his prosthetic into the board and told the screen to lay the radar picture on top of the raw visual. Then it came a lot clearer. Gleaming under a thick icy coating, on the edge of the plane, stood a tall, perfectly preserved brick building.

We were the first people in thirty years to find in space what was unmistakably a piece of old Earth's surface.

Ten minutes later we stood together in the airlock while it went to vacuum. I yawned to let most of my internal air escape, before all my bodily orifices clenched shut. My dermis thickened and became impermeable as the pressure dropped. Lefty's translucent suit lost all its wrinkles.

I quit breathing and switched over to internal oxygen. Lefty's oxygen came from a backpack on his suit. It wasn't recycled directly back into his bloodstream, so he used twenty or thirty times as much as I did in a vacuum.

The outer door slid open and sunlight blasted into the airlock. My inner eyelid polarized and darkened instantly to compensate, as did Lefty's plassite helmet visor. My skin on sun-side brightened from a soothing olive-tinged chocolate to alabaster, then settled into beige, maintaining thermal equilibrium. In space, half of me is always dark, half always light, constantly shifting over my topography as I move. I had strapped pouches around my waist containing the sample bags, pitons, and other miscellaneous junk, slapped a hatchet and a piton-setting gun onto quicklocks on one side of my jet-belt, a half a dozen jet refill magazines on the other, and slung a couple dozen loops of forty-ton line diagonally across my torso.

Lefty had a vidcam slaved to his prosthetic. Woman's work is never done.

We clambered out of the airlock, then kicked off from the hull. It took about ten minutes to drift within touching distance of the slowly turning stroid.

Halfway there, Lefty fell silent in the middle of a sentence.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

His voice sounded strained. "I think I recognize this."

"You were here before? This very place?"

He shook his head inside his helmet. "No. Just this kind of place."

"What do you mean?"

His head shook again. "Wait. I could be wrong."

The stroid rotated under us as we descended into the mist. The flat plane swung under us. He pointed at where he wanted us to touch down, not far from the building, and I fired the piton-setting gun. Unlike a jet gun, it was vented so as to cause zero vector change. The line snaked out and bit into the rock. I reeled us to the surface. Lefty and I were linked, of course, so he came along.

I mentally shifted my spatial orientation so that the surface became "beneath" us instead of in front of us. The indentation near our touch-down became an artificial, roughly rectangular hole in the ground, not a pockmark in the side of a large rock.

Next to one of the short sides of the rectangle, a small stone box poked out of the icy surface. As the stroid continued to tumble, shadows lengthened on the plane. I saw what I'd missed from a distance. Quite a few objects were scattered about low to the ground. They came in different sizes and shapes, but most resembled the one at

my feet.

"This is really eerie, old man," I said, forcing a heartiness into my voice that I didn't much feel. I nudged the stone box with my foot. "Wonder what this thing here is? Looks like it's artificial, held by ice to the ground."

Lefty had bent over to stare into the hole. It was empty.

He turned to me and I saw through the shadowed plassite a distorted smile on his face. The nostrils on his big nose flared, as if he were smelling something that he didn't much like. "Well, pumpkin, that thing there is a headstone. And this hole is an open grave. And that building over there is a church. We're in the middle of a boneyard. Kind of appropriate, don't you think?"

I was two sidereal years old when Earth was murdered. I have a vague memory, blurred by the sharpness of events a few days later, of watching in my mom's lap while they replayed the satellite pictures at accelerated speed. She and Dad were both crying, or so I remember it. I thought the pictures were pretty.

A beautiful green and brown and white ball, two-thirds of it darkened, hung in the center of the screen. Lights traced spidery webs across the dark side of the ball.

Then a big light flared on the ball's surface, so big that it seemed to be a disk, rather than a point on the screen. The ball shivered and began to flake off around the edges.

I've seen the sequence many times since, as have we all. The explosion was centered at one of the world's oldest cities. Jerusalem.

The Israelis didn't do it. It was done by someone crazed beyond all redemption, someone who hated so much that he, or they, will never be understood by the remnants of the human race.

The explosion burned off the atmosphere. It split the Earth open to the molten core, and blew part of it into space. Over the next few years, the tormented planet rejected almost twenty-five percent of itself. The moon's orbit shifted accordingly. Fortunately, the new orbit didn't intersect the Earth's surface at any point.

Thirty years after the Death, the planet still quaked and shivered, and blew into the black sky pieces large enough to be visible from the moon. Its internal fluids coursed to the surface, to be solidified by the coldness of space, then pushed violently aside by more of its flowing molten flesh.

We floated in front of the large closed double doors of the church.

"It was winter in the northern hemisphere when it happened," Lefty said. His voice was emotionless, detachedly analytical. "The only scenario that makes any sense is that a thick coating of snow, partially melted and refrozen as ice, held everything in place. Somehow, this piece of land was tossed up, without a heavy spin imparted that would have torn the church away. It was thrown out at an eccentric angle, far out enough so that no sizable bullets have impacted it before now. It's finally swinging back in close. And we found it. A billion-to-one occurrence."

Abruptly, he triggered a short burst from his jet gun, spinning slowly back from the building.

"I can't go in there," he groaned.

I jetted after him, until I caught an arm and pulled him to me. His face was contorted with a mixture of emotions



that I knew I couldn't in a thousand years properly sort and label.

I held him clumsily, pulled his helmeted head to my shoulder. He trembled in my arms. "Sssshh. It's all right. It's all right, baby."

He nodded, still trembling. I tried to hold him more tightly. I miss Earth in an abstract way. Rationally, I know the Death impoverished my life. I don't feel it emotionally, though. My life is what it is, not what it could have been if Earth still lived. But the old ones know their loss and grieve in a way I never will. Multiply the deaths of my mom and dad billions of times? I cannot imagine it.

After a few minutes his trembling subsided, and he began to speak in a calm monotone.

He pulled back and looked at me solemnly. "I think maybe he put it here for me. I'm afraid that he'll kill me if I try to go in there."

"Who will kill you, Lefty?"

"God."

"What? God? That's crazy, Lefty!" I was shocked. Lefty wasn't a fuzzy-minded mystic.

"I was a priest at Farside Station Four, Athena. I took vows." He'd never told me what he did before the Death. Nobody ever asks those kind of questions. It can be like sticking a knife into an old, scarred wound. I'd told him about my parents, but not because he'd pried.

"On the day of the Death, I realized God couldn't be real. Not if he could let that happen."

"Well, of course," I said. "That's obvious." I've never met anybody who said they believed in a god or gods. I'd never thought much about it before. I guess religion died that day, too.

Lefty shuddered. "It was a revelation to some of us. I went into my room, took off my robes, and walked away from the cathedral. I never went back. I stayed drunk or drugged for the next year, like just about everyone else."

He laughed. "Only, what if he is real? And cruel? That's the alternate way to explain him letting it happen to Earth. I took vows to be his and his alone, and I was never released from them. I've turned my back on him and his viciousness. Maybe if I step onto land consecrated to him, he'll finally destroy me. And I don't even believe in him." He laughed again. "You're right. That's crazy as hell. Let's go inside and see what shape God's house is in."

The doors were frozen shut. We flew like birds to a high window with jagged crystalline teeth around its rim.

Everything on the inside that hadn't been fastened down had come to rest somewhere on the rear wall, away from the direction of the stroid's tumble or against something that had been fastened down. The mist inside was much thinner than it was outside. Colored shafts of light swept slowly across the large room through two largely intact stained glass windows overhead. The beam emanating from Lefty's helmet lamp gave everything inside a second shadow.

Three columns of long wooden high-backed benches covered most of the floor, bolted in place. Various small and medium-sized objects had snagged among the benches, giving them an oddly inhabited look.

At the front of the room a broad lectern stood upright. On the wall above and behind it, dominating the room, hung the frosted, almost-nude body of Lefty's dead god, affixed to a ten-foot-high cross of wood. Its face was twisted in saintly agony, but it was no ethereally delicate

spirit. Instead, the worshippers who had filled the benches on their special day had visited with a muscular bearded giant who'd survived and grown powerful in the furnace of a squalid, primitive desert culture, who'd come to dominate the minds and souls of a nation of god-struck savages and, by dying, those of their descendants for two millennia. I'd once seen an old two-dee about him. His life, and even more, his death, were the stuff of powerful myth. What myths would my children's children have about the death of Earth's billions?

Lefty floated toward the pulpit, eyes fixed on the giant on the wall. He spoke so softly, so bitterly, that I could barely make out the words.

"And he said, 'For I am the Way, the only Way. Come unto me and ye shall have life everlasting.'"

We passed the pulpit and he turned beside me, eyes wide, as if to step up to it and repeat his words to the departed multitude. Then he glanced down and recoiled, reflexively firing his jet gun so hard that he rebounded off the wall behind him.

"Athena, no —"

I turned and was filled with sadness.

I jettied closer, reached out and gently touched the upturned face of the frozen man who squatted in the enclosure of the pulpit. His body was covered by a black robe, and some parts of him had fractured and vanished over the years, but his face was almost intact. He didn't look as though he had been afraid. For forty years he'd serenely crouched there, gazing with blind eyes at the form of his god.

A wordless scream erupted from Lefty's throat, a scream forty years in the making.

He flew to the wall and swarmed up the cross until he was face to face with the giant.

"Liar!" he howled. "Liar! You broke the covenant! You killed us all!" He beat at its head, then set his feet on both sides, just below the crosspiece. He flexed and wrenched spasmodically, until he and the giant flew tumbling away from the wall. As they flew through vacuum in the center of the room, a bullet shattered the stained glass window directly above them. Spinning shards of light haloed Lefty and the giant as the bullet caromed off the cross and into Lefty.

He screamed again, this time in surprise and pain. Blood gouted from his thigh, freezing almost instantly in ragged furry globules.

Lefty spasmed and let go of the giant to reach toward his leg. He groaned as his hands came away covered with black ice.

"Athena ... help me!"

I dug into the pouches at my side. I fumbled through three of them before I pulled out a thin slab of clear plastic pancake-sized patches. Lefty had drifted a dozen more yards toward the back of the church. I jettied after him. He bucked at my touch, but tried to help anchor me upside down relative to his body, by holding my legs to his chest as we pinwheeled through the room. I scuffed away the frozen blood that covered his left leg, eliciting another grunt of agony from him. Air and blood spurted from an eight-inch-long gash. Three patches hastily slapped on it sealed the leak.

I relaxed and Lefty let go of my legs. He panted heavily, trying to reoxygenate.

"You're going to be all right now, sweetheart."

"He tried to kill me!" Lefty exclaimed.

"What?"

"That was a bullet from God. Had to be! I go inside his house and five minutes later he sends a bullet right at me."

Lefty injured, I could handle. Lefty deranged, maybe not.

"Don't be an idiot!" I blurted. I cupped his helmet between my hands and gently shook his head. "You've been glitching since you saw this place. There is no god. And if there was one, he'd probably have better things to do than send a bullet at you. Especially one that practically missed."

The wild look faded. Then he grunted again and looked down. "Maybe it didn't miss." His voice was strained. "I'm still bleeding."

His suit was opaque to his waist, and the stain was spreading. "Maybe you better get a tourniquet on this before it goes too far," he said.

Then he fainted.

Without him to hold me, it wasn't as easy to tie a double circle of line around his upper leg as it had been to apply the patches. By the time I had finished, the stain had reached the top of his abdomen.

I looked closely where the patches covered the wound halfway between his knee and ankle, and despaired. It looked like he was still bleeding. A tourniquet should be a broad strap, not a narrow line, if it's going to do the job properly. The line had almost worked, but not quite. I whipped another double loop around his leg, yanking it so tight that Lefty moaned and shifted. I checked again. The stain didn't seem to be climbing up his chest anymore. The new loop had sealed off everything above itself. But the suit below the tourniquet was gently ballooning.

I looked desperately around the church, but I knew that nothing in it would help me. Anything that might once have served as a decent tourniquet would now be far too brittle and stiff from the cold and vacuum. It would take at least fifteen minutes, more likely twenty, to ferry Lefty to the ship, cycle the airlock up to pressure, cut him out of his suit, and somehow stop the bleeding. Much too long.

If it had been me that took the bullet, my blood vessels would have constricted almost instantly and my thickened dermis would have sealed over the gash. Lefty wasn't modified for life in space, and I'd be left alone again because of it.

Nowadays, all of the Lunar settlements are massively reinforced and have batteries of beamers and rockets to destroy any bullets that come at them. But they were different back before the Death.

Most of the mass that Earth spit forth early on, creating the present-day asteroid belt, travelled on a vector roughly twenty-three degrees off the plane of the ecliptic, at the same angle as the Earth's obliquity. Later, the planet precessed unpredictably as it lost mass and its internal structure and magnetosphere shifted accordingly, throwing out material in just about any direction.

Nobody could stop the bullets that came at the moon in those first days. A week after the Death a big one crunched down more than a hundred clicks south of the Orientale Basin sublunarian complex, where we lived.

I remember being awakened, not by the quake, but by

the loss of pressure seal. I lay in my tiny bed, exhilarated as my modifications kicked in to preserve my life. It felt all-over tingly and pleasant, still does, to shift over into vacuum mode.

Mommy and Daddy had moved my bed into their sleeping room. A few seconds later they were both bending over me, looking concerned. Mommy touched the medallion on the chain around my neck, activating my implanted transceiver.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay. Mommy and Daddy have to get up now, but you try to go back to sleep, dear."

They had been vacuum-proofed, too. The complete modification, including the thermal control systems, was still fairly new, but we'd all had it, and I'd been genetically altered before birth in several ways also. The government subsidized a large portion of the cost, figuring correctly that encouraging its citizens to adapt to their environment would be cost-effective in the long run.

Mommy and Daddy tried to dig us out while I slept. We were forty or fifty meters below the surface, and were the only survivors in the section of the corridor that they still had access to. We'd lost all power, and they weren't able to restore a pressure seal, so we ate cold breakfast ration bars after they woke me up.

A single ray of sunlight lanced down from a crack in the ceiling of the kitchen of one of the neighbors. They put me and my toys in the center of the sunlight each morning. I played happily, not knowing that I was also photosynthesizing, converting my own waste CO₂ back to oxygen. Neither of them could photosynthesize, that being a genetically enabled characteristic.

I wasn't frightened during the four days that they scavenged oxygen and food from the complex while they attempted to escape or contact the outside.

On the fifth morning, they put me in the sunlight, surrounded by my usual toys and a pile of blankets, and all of the ration bars they could find. I don't remember them saying anything to me, but they must have, because I knew they had to go away for awhile, and I was supposed to stay there by myself until some new friends came for me. I still wasn't scared, because I knew Mommy and Daddy wouldn't let me be hurt.

I was a very good little three-year-old girl. I played and slept in that pool of sunlight for two days. On the seventh morning after the quake, I was seriously bored. I pushed open the door from the kitchen and wandered around the neighbor's home. Then I tried to open the door to the corridor, but it was locked. I pounded it with my little fist and something inside the door broke, something that hadn't been designed for prolonged exposure to vacuum and cold. The door slid open.

The hallway was dark, but someone had painted on the cracked, drunkenly misaligned corridor walls many broad, large arrows that glowed brightly in the ultraviolet range. The arrows all pointed toward my doorway.

I touched my medallion and broadcast a call for my Mommy and Daddy. After a few seconds I got a blurred, staticky response that I couldn't understand. I called again, and got the same response.

It triangulated stronger down the corridor to my right. My modifications allow me to see by starlight with perfect clarity. The glowing paint arrows on the walls were a

decent substitute. I headed toward the signal.

Around the second corner I found them wrapped in each other's arms. They couldn't photosynthesize, so they died when they used up all the oxygen they could find.

They wouldn't wake up, no matter how hard I joggled them.

The search party, which had been broadcasting the signal I heard, busted through a wall and found me huddled beside them less than an hour later.

I clung to Lefty in the same way. He was adapted for air and gravity, and that would kill him. On the moon, I could have cut open the suit, drained the blood that threatened to drown him, and elevated his leg to let gravity slow the bleeding, perhaps stop it entirely. Elementary first aid. Completely useless. The ship could accelerate to give us an artificial gravity, but we couldn't get to the ship in time.

I held him, tight. He was going to die, and I couldn't stop him. He was going to leave me, too.

I despaired. My mods prevented me from crying in vacuum, but my body shook, my vision blurred nonetheless.

The centrifugal force of the asteroid's tumble gently guided us toward the debris against the rear wall of the church. Unthinking, I jetted us back toward the clear center. I stared at the gun in my hand and an idea germinated and flowered. It might not work, but it was infinitely better than simply watching Lefty die.

Gravity and acceleration and centrifugal force were functionally the same thing. At least, they were for the function I needed.

But I had to hurry. I'd already wasted precious seconds. We had to get outside. I needed something to anchor myself against. And I needed a mass roughly equal to Lefty's.

I dragged Lefty and the giant on the cross out the hole that had been a stained-glass window before God's bullet shattered it. I locked my legs around the metal crucifix that adorned the top of the steeple and hurriedly secured one end of line to the giant's body. I was affixing the other to Lefty when I thought of the blood that had escaped into his suit. And that would fill his helmet, his lungs.

Begrudging every second, I pulled two more seals out of a pouch, then carefully cut a slit in the suit below the tourniquet. Blood gouted forth and froze. I got most of it out, then slapped on another seal.

Then I cut another slit, this one above the tourniquet, and bled his suit again.

Then I tied his feet together with the other end of the line that was attached to the giant.

I shoved Lefty away from me, holding to the line as it played out. The longer the better. When I had only a few feet of line left, I clenched my legs as tightly as possible around the cross I sat upon and began to spin Lefty, slowly at first, then more rapidly, around and around me.

As he built up circular velocity, his body straightened, feet facing me, head away from me. At first it only took one hand, then both, then my entire torso was thrown into the effort of increasing the centrifugal force on his body.

I got him going as fast as I could, then prepared for the next step. I held the rope with one hand, playing out the last few feet as I used my other hand to chivvy the giant's body into position. Soon I held not the line, but the feet of

the giant as I whirled him, too, above the church.

Then I let go. They spun into the blackness together, tormented figures orbiting each other.

I chased them down in the ship, programming Max to pull abreast of the binary while I waited in the airlock. I jetted out, grabbed the line at the center of their spin, wrapped a few loops around my hand, and cut the giant loose. I reeled Lefty in, twirling ever more slowly as I counteracted the spin with my jets. We yo-yo'd right down to the hull of the ship. I cut us loose from our entangling loops and rushed us into the airlock.

Lefty was still alive. Fixing him up was fairly easy with the right equipment and environment on hand.

The inside of the church was quiet and empty. The soft light that penetrated from outside slowly dimmed until it lost the color it had acquired from passing through the stained glass.

Lefty and I sat at the rear, not talking. Only the candles flickering in sockets along the wall provided any noticeable illumination.

Finally, he sighed and we stood.

"Last one out turns off the lights," he said, twisting the rheostat beside the door that extinguished the candles.

He looped his real arm around my shoulders as we walked down the steps and moved through the boneyard. Above our heads, almost a real starry night began as individual lights snapped on throughout the interior of DisneyStroid's cylinder. The main park had officially closed down half an hour before, and dimming the lights was a gentle reminder to any stragglers that the day's outing was over.

We'd sold the church to them for a hefty up-front cash sum plus a percentage of the gate for the next twenty years. The church site was not made part of the amusement park. It hardly fitted into any of the themes. Their marketing and public relations people decided it would be better if they didn't actually charge a fee for people to visit the church. But gross receipts for the resort complex were up more than a third since the church and its surrounding land had been planted against the curved interior of DisneyStroid, near the West Cap.

They'd refurbished it, but not much. Their marketing people wanted, for a change, to present the public with something as close to the reality as possible. We strolled along the new plascrete sidewalk that wound toward the gate in the new wall that marked the boundary between the past and the present.

At the gate, he turned and stared back at the church, its outline rising above us.

"You believe in him again, don't you?" I said.

After a long silence, he shook his head. "No. I believed in him all along. Until we found this place." He closed the gate. "Now, finally, I'm free. I don't have to believe in a malignant deity to explain the Death. It just ... happened."

As we walked in silence away from the church grounds, I remembered the giant, who had saved Lefty's life. I had wanted to retrieve him so that he could be part of the display, but Lefty had stopped me.

We tracked on radar as the giant flew straight out of the plane of the ecliptic. He might never run into any bullets.

He might sail on forever.

□

As Funny As a Dog in Shorts



I haven't finished measuring it for the other nations of the Earth, but I can report to you that in the United States, human beings spend approximately two percent of their GNP on advertising. This is about what we're spending on our planet to distribute the product specifications we call waneh.

There is where the similarity ends, however. Except for the arcane humor that underlies each bit of waneh, there's nothing in it but product specifications. We thought our consumers would get all the information they needed to make purchase decisions from the specifications. And the impenetrable humor was just there for the amusement of the waneh composers.

Human beings have proved us wrong, however. This advertising of theirs includes everything but product specifications. In particular, I think we have seriously underestimated the power of female lip imagery as an engine of economic growth. Don't conclude that human advertising consists entirely of images of female lips (although you might actually get pretty close to the truth with such a conclusion). No, human advertising is a cornucopia of imagery, information, and emotion. We are in the dark ages when it comes to the distribution of information to consumers. Waneh looks pitiful, as well as obscure, compared to advertising.

There are four principal media for human advertising. The most popular and most ancient is print. In print advertising, human

beings have probably found every possible way to present the image of painted female lips. Photographed, drawn, with the woman attached, disembodied from the woman, smiling, puckering: the variety is actually quite breathtaking to contemplate. The images are exquisite, and in most print advertising, nothing as vulgar as text or reasoning is allowed to disrupt this message.

The second medium, radio, has suffered a decline over the past two generations, but it is still enormously profitable. In radio advertising, an announcer describes the images of the woman's lips so the listener can imagine them. The advantage of this medium is that the consumer can receive the advertising while driving a car.

The third medium, direct mail, is a system by which product messages are stuffed into the mailboxes of human beings who aren't interested in them. The average human being receives upwards of 113 pounds of direct mail advertising in a week. This medium is the principal means by which the U.S. Postal Service remains gainfully occupied. Human beings write so few letters any more that if it weren't for direct mail, the Postal Service would be gone by now. Ironically, this medium makes little use of female lip imagery, but it has had notable success in attracting attention via paper cuts.

The most important advertising medium, of course, is television. In the United States, there is a television on and running in each

household for an average of seven hours and three minutes of every day. By my calculations, this exposes an American human being to 42,000 commercial announcements in a year. No wonder Americans are so well-informed about the products and services they purchase!

This most imposing of advertising media offers everything: beautiful music, stories, testimonials, varied imagery, scientific testing, drama... almost anything you can name, except, of course, product specifications. Television advertising simply puts our waneh to shame, especially in the area of humor.

Human advertisers once shunned humor as futile, but recent testing has shown that well-used humor can actually induce shifts in brand preference (don't you just love advertising talk?). Accordingly, modern television advertising features people pushing trucks off cliffs, chimpanzees in business suits, car salesmen who tell fantastic lies, dogs dressed in colorful shorts... all the elements, in short, of sophisticated humor.

Compare this to our waneh, with its obscure jokes that nobody understands. When was the last time you ever laughed at a waneh joke? I think that's our chief problem in the distribution of product information. We aren't getting our waneh's mirth. □

Henry, Have You Gone to the Moon?

By Steven Forstner

Art by Carol Heyer

The cat is mad, howling and clawing to get free. In the distance, police sirens wail. Coming closer. Coming for me.

"Close canopy." While the cockpit canopy lowers to seal me in, I punch the button for the garage door.

"Systems power on." Lights twinkle on the console. The sirens draw a few seconds closer, and the garage door inches its way upward.

At a time when I was raising hell, Henry and Zelda were raising eyebrows. They moved into the little clapboard house across the street from my parents when I was still a teenager. Two elderly, unmarried people cohabiting, or living together if you're hip. The neighbors said they were "shacking up," but then the neighbors said a lot of things.

Zelda was confined to a wheelchair, her mobility stolen by a stroke in that semi-mythical past before I was born. She led a curious sort of half-life trapped in her metal chair, unable to tie her shoes, change her clothes, or do any of a hundred things I took for granted. Henry was her arms and legs, doing the mundane chores like cooking and cleaning. She was his eyes and ears — and sometimes his guardian. Henry couldn't see too well, and needed a magnifying glass over his eyeglasses to read a newspaper headline. So Zelda read for him. He couldn't hear too well, either, asking to have things repeated over and over, each time a little louder. So she listened for him, too, calling him when the tea kettle whistled and things like that. One thing he could always hear, though, was the little silver dinner bell she rang when she needed him for something. I swear he could hear that bell three blocks away in a pouring rain with thunder and lightning blasting. He'd hear it when nobody else could, and then he'd run to see what she needed.

As a mining engineer, Henry had spent half his life underground. Then one day during a blast, a hunk of rock the size of a brick went where it couldn't go. One of those freak accidents that can't possibly happen — but do. The rock knocked off Henry's helmet, and part of the back of his skull, too. He was in the hospital a long time.

Every time the weather was just right — which was almost always — the metal plate patching Henry's skull acted up, and he started seeing old friends in inanimate objects. Zelda would find him chatting with dishes, towels, and overshoes. Poor Henry spent a lot of time arguing with the telephone pole on the corner.

Our small-town neighborhood was full of retired people with nothing better to do than gossip and pry. They'd had a field day with Henry and Zelda, just like they had with me before. First there was a teenager in their midst, and now people living in sin. And right there next door, too! And what was the neighborhood coming to?

Stories flew back and forth like quicksilver on a dinner plate. Little facts, fancies, and observations breaking off

in spinning droplets and slapping back together to form new bubbles. Then the new stories made the rounds.

I learned something about gossip — men are just as bad as women. Only they go about it differently. The men sat around drinking beer and talking like authorities. Never mind they had no facts, they *knew* what was going on.

"Hell, if I was in his place, I'd do the same thing."

"He's got her house. He's got her money. He's got it made, and she can't even run around behind his back."

"Aw, it's better'n that. Anytime he wants he can run around on *her*, and she'll never know."

The old women preferred to drink coffee and ask each other questions. When a suitable one was raised, everyone supplied an answer and the best was accepted as fact.

"I wonder how she bathes herself?"

"I bet she's got rails on her bathtub. My George and I stayed at a hotel once that had a tub like that —"

"I don't think she bathes at all!"

"I think — Henry bathes her!" *Bingo!* A winner.

"Oh, my."

"I bet he does!"

"He'd have to!"

"He's crazy, you know."

"Oh, yes. I saw him talking to a tree the other day."

"Well, I wouldn't let the crazy old fool into my bathroom. Just the thought of it —"

And so on. As if it really mattered, or was any of their business.

I liked Zelda well enough, but Henry was my favorite, despite his disabilities. He had something near and dear to a teenager's heart — tools!

Anytime I needed to fix my car, all I had to do was trot over and borrow whatever I needed. He had a lifetime of tools in his little garage — tools to pound with, tools to pry with, tools to cut and turn and drive with, tools to repair anything a teenager needed repaired. Each hung from a little wire hook on a big peg board that he'd attached to the wall. And he knew just what each was for, what it was called, and where it belonged on that board. And it's okay to borrow it, but by God, *put it back!*

He also kept something else in there, a big something with a tarp over it. A something that everyone in the neighborhood had been laughing about.

Being Henry's best friend (and borrower of his tools), I didn't want to believe the rumors. But every time I went into that garage, there it was — that great big something with the tarp over it. I kept hoping it was a boat or an antique car or anything except a ...

"It's a spaceship," Henry said, and he pulled the tarp back to show me his prize.





Just like that. "It's a spaceship." As if everybody had a spaceship in his garage. I gripped the wrench a little tighter, realizing I was alone in a garage with a man the neighbors said was crazy.

"It's nice," I lied, edging towards the door.

"Thank you."

The word "spaceship" implies a few things, at least on this planet. Things like rockets and fins, and big fuel tanks, things that Henry's spaceship didn't have. No rockets. No fins. No place even to put in a quart of oil, let alone rocket fuel. Just nothing. Nothing to steer it, or drive it, or even to stop it for that matter.

It sat on a pair of do-it-yourself sawhorses. (What better place to keep a do-it-yourself spaceship?) It looked like — well, I know it's weird, but it looked like a bathtub. One of those big, old-fashioned, claw-footed bathtubs, with the feet still on. At least the bottom of it did. The top looked like the lid off a chrome coffin, except that it had two cockpits — a big Henry-sized one in back and a tiny one up front.

Henry was serious. Proud of this third-grade science fair project. But it looked so funny, sitting on those sawhorses with the little scaffold around it, that I almost laughed. Then I relaxed a bit. After all, I *did* have a wrench in my hand. (Besides, I'm snoopy.)

"Where'd you get it?"

"Built it."

"From scratch?" I was amazed at his ingenuity.

"No. From a kit."

My amazement plummeted and I wondered how much the shyster who sold it to him had charged. Probably his life's savings. "A kit?" I'd heard old people got ripped off like that, but I'd never expected to see it.

"Sure. Want to see the catalog?" And he rummaged around until he found a small dog-eared pamphlet.

What Henry handed me looked a lot like a religious tract. It was printed on that really cheap, lightweight paper copy machines use. It looked copied, too, the printing all blurred and smudged. But the cover! The cover had a full-color picture that made me catch my breath. A *real* picture and not some artist's rendering. An honest-to-God, take-it-with-a-camera picture. A really good picture. The kind of picture you can only get from one place. It filled the whole cover with carbon-paper black pricked with little points of white. And there in the center hung a big yellow sun, with a couple of planets shining like crescents around it. It looked like — like you could reach in and touch them. At the bottom in big white letters it said: "Galaxy-Explorer Mark X, the *ultimate* in leisure vehicles."

I almost asked Henry for his magnifying glass. Then I thought better of it. Suppose I peeked at one of those planets under that glass. What — what would I do if I saw little roads and houses, and maybe even little people? (Okay, so I'm a snoopy coward.)

I read the text instead. It was a lot of hype about how you could "Explore the solar system. Adventure on alien planets. Vacation on Venus," and things like that. It had line drawings of the finished ship, and a list of specifications about what it'd do. Could do. Should do.

When I was a little kid, there was an ad in the back of one of my comic books for a "submarine." It had a periscope and torpedoes, and the picture showed a couple of

lucky kids getting ready to explore the deep. I pestered and pestered until Mom sent away for one. Guess what? It was cardboard. Henry's spaceship definitely wasn't cardboard. But the submarine had only been ten bucks or so. According to the catalog, the price tag for the spaceship was significantly higher.

"You paid ten thousand bucks for that?" I croaked.

"Little by little, sure," Henry said defensively. "It's like Zelda's book club. Every month they send you another part and bill you for it. You assemble as you go. Spaceships aren't cheap, you know. I couldn't afford it all at once."

"God, it'd take forever to finish that way! How long have you been at this?"

"Since I retired and met Zelda. That's been —" he did a quick (for him) mental calculation — "about thirty years."

Thirty years! "Geeze, that's a long time. You been carryin' it with you when you move?"

"If I hadn't, you wouldn't be laughing about it now."

"I'm not laughing." Now it was my turn to be defensive.

"Want to look inside? It's okay, but it's not finished, you know." And before I could answer, he did something that almost sent me out of that garage right then. He turned to the spaceship and said, "Open up!"

And it did! The canopy cranked back like a clam taking a drink. Powerful. Silent. Smooth. Like maybe this thing really would work, which made no sense at all. Why bother to make things work just to rip the old man off? Except, I realized, they'd been ripping him off regularly for thirty years, piece by piece, payment by payment. If things hadn't worked as he went along, he would have given up. End of all those nice monthly payments. Still, the voice-activated stuff was pretty high-tech and expensive. Why send him all that expensive equipment for a ripoff? Why not make it out of cardboard and be done?

"Does it all work like that?" I asked, climbing to the scaffolding.

"Well, there's hand and foot controls, too, but you really don't need them."

I peered into the rear cockpit, expecting an orange crate for a seat and a bicycle tire steering wheel. Instead there were rows and rows of little lights, all dark with the power off. Dials and gauges jammed together like the insides of half a dozen sports cars all jumbled up and stuffed in any which way. Things to turn and pull and push and step on. And a pilot's seat like something out of a military jet, complete with control stick on the arm-rest.

"This is really neat," I said, peering into the front cockpit. No way a person could get in there. It was really tiny. There were no instruments or monitor screens or anything. And the seat was a little sling, with all kinds of straps in funny places. "What's this one for?"

"Oh. That's for the cat."

Just like that. "It's a spaceship." "It's for the cat." Henry was good at the old deadpan. I think that's why I liked him so much. That, and okay, maybe his tools. (So I'm shallow. A shallow snoopy coward.)

"The cat! What cat? You don't even have a cat."

"Not yet, no. But when I get the ship done, I'll get one."

Okay, fine. "What do you need a cat for?"

"To go in the front cockpit."

Good, Henry. Pull my leg some more. I like it. I looked at his face and he was serious, so I tried again. "Okay, Henry. Why do you need a cat?"

"To fly the spaceship."

Was that my mother I heard calling? Had I *really* allowed myself to be lured into a garage by a madman? Would anyone ever hear from me again?

Just as I was ready to run for it, Henry said, "See that little helmet?"

I looked, and there on the floor of the cockpit was a tiny, cat-sized crash helmet with ear holes. Weird. "You put that on him, and it reads his mind while he looks out the window. And then the computer uses that to fly the ship. A cat's reflexes are way faster than a human's, you know."

"Where'd you get that baloney?" If I ever got my hands on the hucksters who sold him this bill of goods ...

"It's not baloney! It's in the manual!" He seemed insulted as he reached under the seat in the rear cockpit and pulled out volume one of his owner's manual. "See, it's right here on page eight-twenty-seven."

Sure enough, on page eight hundred twenty-seven started a long-winded explanation of cat reflexes. Complete with diagrams, pictures, and charts. Actually, the computer didn't read the cat's mind, or even its brain waves. Henry was a little confused about that. Instead, it detected nerve impulses to the limbs. If the cat twitched, the ship twitched. If the cat tried to duck or run, the ship would duck or run. It reminded me of something the navy tried with pigeons in the war. I couldn't remember exactly how it worked, but they used pigeons to spot downed fliers and planes and stuff. So Henry's cat *might* work. At least it had some basis in the real world.

"But what if the cat sees something and wants to chase it?" I asked. "A mouse or something?"

"This is a *spaceship*. There are no mice in space."

"Oh. Right. Well, what are you gonna do with it when it's finished?"

"Fly it up to the Moon."

"What for?"

"I've never been there, and I want to look around."

Definitely, my mother was definitely calling, probably to remind me to clip my toenails or something. I clutched the wrench I'd come to borrow and started looking for an excuse to hit the door.

"Well, it's really nice, Henry, but I'd better get going. I want to get my car fixed before dinner."

"Would you like to help me with it?"

"Help?"

"Sure. There's still a lot of parts to put on. I could use some help. You know, my eyes aren't as sharp as they used to be."

"Uh — gee, I don't know," I said, thinking of all the wasted afternoons this project would cost. "My car takes a lot of time, and uh — I'll be going to college next fall, and um, I won't be around much to help."

"That's okay. You help as much as you can, and I'll share it with you. Fifty-fifty. Okay?" (What is half of nothing, anyway?)

I knew if I turned him down he'd understand, but I'd feel like a first-class piece of trash. Especially when I was getting ready to make off with his wrench and his ratchet, and his screwdrivers were already at my house. Still, this harebrained scheme would cost a lot of time.

"Okay," I sighed. "When do we start?"

The months went by, sometimes quick, sometimes slow. I kept my car running with parts from a junkyard and Henry's tools. Over the summer I got a job bagging groceries at the supermarket downtown to help with college tuition. And once a month, I spent an afternoon helping Henry build his spaceship.

It turned out to be a lot of fun, and we had some good times, the old man and me, sitting in his garage, reading through the owner's manual and trying to figure out how to hook up each new piece. It was like working on a giant jigsaw puzzle that would take Henry to the Moon someday, at least in his dreams.

It was funny, but the more I worked on it, the more I came to think of it as real, something that would work as advertised, and not a rat-hole for an old man's SSI check.

I guess maybe I got caught up in the fantasy, too. It was easy to do. When I hooked up each new part, it worked, which meant somebody had planned it that way. Somebody knew, before the manual was written thirty years before, what each part should look like, how it should be connected, and how it should work. That's an awful lot of effort just to rip somebody off. And each and every part worked, except one. That one Henry put back in the box and returned to the factory. A couple of weeks later a replacement arrived, and worked fine the minute we installed it. When everything is working according to plan, it's not hard to believe. So I believed.

And each month, it seemed, Henry's eyes got a little worse, until even the magnifying glass didn't help anymore. He was just wearing out, an old man hanging on only because of his dream. I did most of the reading and assembling, while Henry passed the tools and kept me company.

Eventually I left for college, and the parts piled up for a few months at a time until I could get home. I always looked forward to those visits with Henry.

Then last month, Henry was sick. He stayed in bed most of the time I was there, and hobbled out only as I was putting on the last of the new parts.

"That's a big one," Henry said as I struggled to uncrate the part. "I made the delivery man carry it out here. I couldn't lift it."

"I'm not surprised," I grunted.

The instructions said it was a "main power grid," but it looked suspiciously like an ordinary radiator, except it was a *lot* heavier than any radiator I'd ever lifted. Every part of the ship looked like something else. Cigarette lighters were really tiny computers, and flashlights were parts of the drive, as if someone had camouflaged them. (Or else they really *were* cigarette lighters and flashlights.)

"Where's it supposed to go?" Henry asked.

I studied the manual. "Underneath. It bolts to the bottom with these screws." I peered at the underside of the ship. "Geeze, they should've sent this before all the other stuff, then I could've just turned the whole thing over. How am I supposed to get this up there and hold it in place?"

"There's a lift bar over there," Henry said, pointing with his cane. (When had he started using a cane?) "You lift it and I'll shove blocks underneath. Don't they teach you *anything* in that fancy school of yours?"

"I'm studying electronics. The heaviest thing I ever lift

is a pair of wire clippers." I got the lift bar and some bricks while Henry laughed at the joke.

Even the exertion of pushing two bricks under the grid was too much for Henry and sent him into a coughing fit. "Are you all right?" I asked. (When had he gotten so frail?)

"I'm fine. Just can't shake this cold."

"If you want to rest, I can finish up here," I offered. "All I have to do is turn a few bolts."

He didn't, though. He wanted to stay until I was done, probably to make sure I put his tools back where they belonged. Or maybe it was the excitement of seeing his dream nearly completed. The grid was the second-to last part.

After I finished, we went back to the house, and Zelda put him to bed. It cut our visit short and I missed the usual chat, but he needed the rest. I came away wondering when his hair had gotten so thin. He seemed smaller, too, as if he shrank a little with each visit.

Last week I got a package from Henry with a note scrawled in childish block letters half an inch high. He said he was sick, and the doctors couldn't do much. Would I take the last part and check it out in the college's electronics lab, and then bring it home and we'd install it? He'd be better by then. He said, "The doctors don't know shit."

I called to find out how he was, maybe say hello if he was up to it, but a strange woman answered the phone, Zelda's daughter Ruby. "No," she said. "You can't talk to him. He passed away last night. If you wanted to talk to him, why didn't you call yesterday?" And then she hung up. Henry, did you leave without me? Are you going to the Moon?

I put the note in my wallet and took the part to the lab like Henry wanted. A Mason jar — that's the only way to describe it. The stupid part looked like a Mason jar with a few wires running out of it, wires with really odd connectors that didn't show up in any of my texts or catalogs.

Without Henry's manuals I had to guess at power supplies and wiring. I tried to solder up a makeshift connector, but the fumes kept getting in my eyes. I spent most of the night in the lab wondering why I hadn't gone home more often or called more, or stayed longer when I was there. Henry, are you going to the Moon?

They cremated Henry yesterday and put his ashes in a brass urn. It was a nice service. Afterwards I tried to talk to Zelda, but Ruby said, "Leave her alone, she's upset." Then she said they were going to take all of Henry's tools and things, the stuff he saved and slaved a lifetime for, and have a yard sale. "Clean out that garage," she said, "and get rid of that old junk." Gone. All of it gone, sold for whatever someone would pay.

Tonight I've done a stupid thing. Maybe you would say criminal, maybe not, but stupid it is. I went to the funeral home and stole Henry's ashes. It was easy. Who cares what happens to an old man's ashes? Then I got a cat.

And now I'm taking my half of the spaceship. Can I help it if Henry's half comes, too? A deal's a deal. And Henry, I don't want you sitting on somebody's mantelpiece like a trophy.

Congratulations to the 1990 Hugo Award winners

Best Novel: *Hyperion* by Dan Simmons

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The Mason jar lit up the moment I plugged it in, but the cat was a problem, spitting and biting and clawing my hands as I strapped it down and crammed the helmet on its furry little head. I tried to be careful, so careful not to show any light or make any noise, but the damn cat howling and crying messed me up. Zelda or her snotty daughter Ruby must have heard me.

Little red lights twinkle into green as the ship runs through its internal diagnostics. At least I think that's what it's doing. I haven't had time to actually read the piloting section of the manual. The monitor screen is going nuts trying to give a radar image of the inside of the garage. The sirens keep getting closer.

"Grid power on." The ship rises, hovering a few inches above the sawhorses.

The damn garage door still isn't open. Too slow, too damn slow. Red and blue lights slash through the window and across the chromed top of the ship.

Damn that Ruby! No time to waste — gotta go for it. Break the door down if it won't get out of the way.

"Go! Go! Emergency, go!"

We're moving — fast. The ship dances crazily as it dodges the ascending garage door. The cat! I forgot about the stupid cat! The cat ducked! It works, Henry! It works!

We're out without a scratch. Way to go, kitty!

Red and blue lights in the street, right on top of us. Sirens wailing, people running with guns out, shooting. Lead sprays off the front canopy. Dead, we're dead.

Turning, diving, the cat is in control, spinning the ship like a ballet dancer. Turning tail and running.

We're gone. Moving like nothing has ever moved before. Take that, Ruby! Take that, all of you!

I blink and we're half a mile away. I'm fighting the control stick. No response. The cat! The cat won't let go!

Down the railroad tracks to the siding. Fast, too fast!

"Stupid cat! Let go, willya? Let go! Oh, my God! No! Nice kitty! Don't hide! Not under the engine!"

Red light strobes on the monitor screen. A black and yellow thing fills my vision, rushing down on me. I pull back on the stick.

"Up! Up! Go up!"

The noise still echoes in my brain (ever bounce a bathtub off a locomotive?). I reach for the owner's manual. Now that we're on solid ground, I better figure out the finer points of flying this thing. The can with Henry's ashes sits atop the console, right up under the canopy where he can see real good.

By the way, Henry, welcome to the Moon. □

Country

(Continued from page 5)

The chains on the swing groaned and he heard a loud, masculine sob.

"It's not that, Cleo," Siegel had never heard his father's voice so raw. "Look him up in some damn institution? I had a cousin die in an institution. From neglect, Cleo, sheer neglect. Not my son."

"It hurts, Cleo, it hurts to look at him, knowing he'll never have a normal life, never have the kind of things we want for him. I watched him yesterday, playing outside, ignoring the other kids. He stood there, just listening like he does. What is it he hears? What is it he dreams that makes him scream at night? He's my son, Cleo, but when he gets that look — I don't know him. And I'm scared that I never will."

Siegel shut the refrigerator door softly. He wiped his sticky foot on the carpet in the hall and headed back to bed.

His older brother had gone to Vietnam, making it home in time to graduate from college with Siegel's younger brother. They'd stood so tall in their caps and gowns. Siegel had never done well in school, and getting through high school had been a squeak. There had been too many days when he couldn't concentrate.

He had watched his brothers proudly, jealous and sad, knowing he faced a future of doctors and mind-numbing medication. So he told his parents he was joining the Peace Corps and going to Africa — a name he pulled from the air. He cashed the savings bonds his grandparents had been giving him since infancy, and bought a one-way ticket to Nairobi.

Siegel turned sideways, sweating in the wad of twisted sheets. The air was heavy and close — tense with the rains that were overdue. The African moon illuminated the mosquito netting over his bed. There were no voices tonight, no strange shadows in the corner.

He had always *wanted* — wanted the life that came so easily to everyone else. When he was seventeen one of his mother's friends had had a baby — her fourth, a boy. Some people did not like Siegel around their children, but she had let him hold the tiny child. The baby slept soundly, head heavy and warm in the crook of Siegel's elbow.

Siegel had studied the small dark eyelashes, the tiny fingernails, the perfect miniature ears. He looked up and found the woman smiling at him. Just for a moment, they understood each other perfectly.

Rare, that understanding. He had no peers. Nobody he knew heard voices, not *his* voices. Nobody he knew worried about strange, sharp thoughts slipping in through cracks in the wall.

Sometimes he thought he could *do* it — fight it, beat it. But he was getting tired. When he looked in the mirror, he saw a horrible face. His face.

A man with a face like that would never be a father, no matter how hard he fought.

The dogs began barking frantically. Siegel got up and penned them in the bedroom. He pulled on his trousers and headed downstairs. The polished wood floor was cool on his bare feet. He grabbed the rifle that was propped against the wall in the dark kitchen, and loaded his gun in the moonlight.

He thought of the cattle pen, and of the Kikuyu boy guarding his animals. His muscles bunched with urgency,

but he didn't run, not with a loaded gun at the ready, and not in a country that demanded caution.

At first he thought the boy was dead, so quietly did he lie, curled up in the dirt, dark caked on his dark, smooth skin. The boy couldn't have been more than six or seven, all alone and worn ragged from the work of the day. His naked chest rose and fell steadily, his face untroubled and concentrated. Siegel would never have survived such a childhood.

The cows were frantic, facing east and straining their eyes in the dark. The boy had not awakened, and Siegel looked carefully in the pen, heart beating hard enough to rustle the top of his shirt. He saw the light, yellow shape of a young lioness. The hair stirred on the back of his neck.

The lion was smothering a calf, its muzzle caught in her jaws. The calf thrashed feebly. Siegel aimed his gun, fingers slippery on the trigger. He was not a good shot. There would be other lions, just out of sight to the east, letting the cows pick up their scent, keeping them frantic and distracted.

Siegel did not want to kill the lion. He admired her cunning, her mastery.

The air cracked with the sound of the shot. The lioness howled and leaped backwards. She stumbled to her feet and Siegel heard the dry grass swish as she ran.

The shot roused the Kikuyu boy and he ran with Siegel to the calf. She was dead; the cows milled frantically. Siegel stood and stared at her body, his stomach heaving. There was blood on the ground near the calf, and a trail leading off into the brush. It was a bad mistake, leaving a lion wounded and loose. A bad omen.

He took a deep, steady breath. Africa was in his blood, but it was the hardest, most lethal land he could imagine, demanding of him everything and nothing. Its dirt caked the creases in his skin, its rhythms swept his soul. He would never leave Africa.

But it was not a land for the feeble. It was not a land for mistakes. He thought of the lioness, raging through the underbrush, bleeding and hurt. He felt sick, as if he had shot a child. He wiped sweat off his forehead. He wondered how badly she was hurt. Would she heal, and regain her mastery? Or would she slow, sleep, and die?

At least her pain would end. He could see no end to his own. This time next year he would be the same — or worse. He was like the land — Africa would not change, Siegel would not change. Unless, perhaps, the old man was right.

Siegel tracked Saitoti down after breakfast and they went to the Kikuyu village together. The old man sat outside his hut in the sun, scratching his chest. Siegel tied the dogs to a post. Jack whimpered at his disappearing back.

"Come in out of the sun," Ahden said.

Saitoti sat in the dirt, across from the old man. Siegel shifted weight from one leg to the other.

"I've made up my mind," Siegel said.

Ahden nodded. "But you have questions?"

"Yeah. I want to know ... how it's done. Physically. Does it hurt very much?"

Ahden frowned. "It does not hurt. It is a joyous thing — like sex, or birth...."

"Birth hurts," Saitoti said.

"For women, yes," Ahden said. "But not the baby. For the baby, it is good. The mechanism ... the mechanism has

a lot to do with the way we reproduce. We have precise control when we pass genetic information to our offspring. Part of our pattern of reproduction involves reshuffling the information in our chromosomes before we pass it on. This way we can vary the chromosomes that make up our children — adding or subtracting traits. We build our children the way you build huts, limited only by the material at hand.

"We are able to pass ourselves on in pretty much the same way. It is an extreme genetic recombination. We rebuild, in you, our essence. You would call it our soul and brain."

"So what will happen to me?" Siegel asked. "My soul. My brain."

"Room for both. We will inhabit together," Ahden said. "It can be rich that way. I have done it before, but only with my own kind."

"What about the demon?" Saitoti asked.

"There is no demon," Ahden said. "Siegel has a sickness or weakness of some kind. I take a lot of creatures right as they die. I do not go in until they give up and take their leave. Then I am usually left with a body in a bad way. I can manipulate on a genetic level — which means control over mutation, and repair."

"Can you heal me?" Siegel dug his nails into his palms.

"Maybe. Mostly what I do is brute force stuff — cell regeneration to fix a tired heart, that kind of thing. Sometimes the body is in pretty good shape, it was the mind that was through."

"What will happen to the old man you are now?" Saitoti asked.

Ahden shrugged. "His body will return to the earth. That is the custom here."

Siegel glanced at Saitoti. "Working this out could get sticky."

"I will die of heart failure. It is past time — this heart is giving out. I have created havoc here already." The smile was rueful. "And elsewhere. I need a place to go."

"When and where?" Siegel asked.

"Here," said Ahden, "and now."

"But..."

"Move my body outside afterwards, and do it quickly. No use them having to burn the hut, and they will if I die inside." Ahden approached Siegel. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah. Okay."

"Come out of the corner, then."

Siegel stepped forward slowly. He heard Saitoti draw a deep breath, and he clenched his jaw, ready for pain. Ahden pressed a dry palm over his left ear. Siegel studied the sagging flesh on that ancient arm. The hairs on the back began to stir, starting at the elbow, and working their way down to the back of the old man's hand. Siegel felt a mild shock around his ear, then a burst of tingling pleasure. He shook his head, dizzy, and doubled over a stool. He didn't notice the old man slide to the floor. Siegel's head buzzed like it did when he'd had just the right amount of beer. He relaxed as the intensity faded.

"Ahden," Saitoti said softly. He dragged the old man out of the hut, laying him carefully in the dirt. The Kikuyu swarmed close, muttering and shaking their heads. Siegel came out of the hut and the villagers backed away.

"They say that your demon got him," Saitoti whispered. He untied the dogs and they headed home, Siegel glassy-eyed and staggering, and Saitoti very quiet.

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Siegel felt the sun on his back, the drips of sweat that stained his cotton shirt. His senses were sharp and hungry, absorbing the stifling heat, the arch of tennis shoes against his feet, the pumping of his heart, the steady rhythm of his pace. The dogs puffed along beside him; insects droned in the grass.

It was good, all of it. His mind touched the quiet joy he felt and ranged on, his hampered and clear. He could concentrate now, read anytime he wanted, and he slept as he imagined a baby would — deeply, untroubled, no dreams. Waking up was best. He had awakened with a sense of dread as long as he could remember, but now those feelings were gone. That first touch of consciousness held a new feeling of order and calm.

Then the awareness would come. Ahden. Always interesting, full of curiosity. Ahden was a repository of memory and experience, and they stayed up late shooting thoughts back and forth. Mental masturbation, Siegel called it.

Ahden spent a lot of time resting. Siegel was surprised at how often Ahden withdrew — becoming so unobtrusive that Siegel was hardly aware he was there.

"It is a break, Siegel," Ahden had explained. "You do all the work, the living, so I can come and go. I have not been just me for a long time."

"Can't you resume your old shape?"

"I have forgotten how. This experiencing, taking over a new life — it is addictive. One day, when I was tired and homesick, I found I could not remember how to be just me. I could not recall how to go home."

"You miss your brothers, Siegel. Your mind touches their memories every day. I miss my children. They grew up a long time ago. Without me. Someday they will die without me." Siegel felt a tear on his cheek. "I was not the birth parent, so I did not have the physical connection to the children. I had the ability to leave and I was glad of my freedom, then. I begin to understand, though, that if I had been constrained like that, to stay close, I would be different. Home and happy, I think. Like the Kikuyu. They are fascinating creatures. They have nothing and everything. Empathy does, at last, make maturity inevitable." The tears stopped and dried on his hot cheeks.

The dogs raced ahead, and Siegel longed for the cool shade of his porch. He walked up the front steps, feet thumping the wood. The house disturbed him. He looked at it and knew that the Siegel who had lived there had been a man in the netherworld of madness.

Yesterday he had put shutters on the windows. The raw new wood waited to be painted. He liked the effect, they way the shutters fought the empty forlornness that hung about the house. It would take time, but bit by bit Siegel was making changes. He found things that made him feel strange and chilly. A beautiful set of French doors boarded up. A basement full of hoarded food, a lot of it spoiled. There were times when he sat down and wept for the old Siegel.

He had always felt his father's legacy in the breadth of his shoulders, the length of his stride. He'd never known he had so much of his mother's quiet, steady joy. She had always been one of the lucky ones who had found her way. Now he was finding his.

Siegel lost the thread of the story he was reading and set the book on the floor. He had other things on his mind. Ahden worried him. They had gotten along well

those first days, but this morning Ahden had been grumpy, accused him of not feeding his body properly, and then withdrawn. Siegel could feel that Ahden was uneasy, and the discomfort seeped into his own thoughts. He wondered if he could sleep.

A sudden noise made him jump. Saitoti stood in the doorway.

"Why did you not answer me, Siegel? I have been on your porch calling."

"What are you doing here? When I saw you this morning you said you had some cows to sell."

"And now I am back."

"Oh come on, it's two days' walk just to get to the market."

"But I did not go to the market. That is why I am back."

Siegel slammed his fists on the arms of his chair. "Why are you here?"

Saitoti clenched his jaw. "You had that look again."

"What look?"

"You always ask me how I know when you will have trouble. I know from the look you have. That of a starving man, feeding upon himself."

Siegel sprang from his chair. "I won't go back to it. You understand? You're wrong. I'm okay. I read books now and remember. I sleep, Saitoti, I sleep with no dreams. The voices are gone. I'm ... me. Really me. And I like it. I'm well. I won't go back, do you understand me? Do you understand me?"

Saitoti looked at him but said nothing.

"I'm going to bed."

He slammed past Saitoti and ran up the staircase. He tripped on the top step, and caught himself on his hands. He blew on his stinging palms and wiped them on the back of his pants.

Something was wrong. He listened and heard nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The hallway was dark, the only light a slit beneath his bedroom door. A drop of sweat rolled down his rough unshaven cheeks, stinging the dry windburned skin. He was unbalanced by the sudden deafness; it was hard to get his bearings. He crawled toward the streak of light under the door. He could feel his pulse, feel the hard thud of his heart, beating at a steady, agonizing pace.

He was afraid; his heart should be racing. His body throbbed with adrenaline, yet the heart beat slow and steady. Ahden must be controlling it, keeping it stable. If he could make it to the light he would be okay, but his movements slowed, his mind slaved to the beat, beat, beat of his heart.

His fingers were inches from the door and he lunged forward. He never made it. He fell backwards into a black, fetid pit, his throat raw with screams he could not hear. He slammed into something wet and spongy, something that gave softly, drawing him deep in its folds. His shirt soaked up the slimy, warm wetness.

The sponge spasmed, pushing him up and away, then relaxed, drawing him back down. It spasmed again, and Siegel realized that it beat along with his heart — that it was his heart.

"Ahden."

No answer.

"Ahden!"

Siegel squirmed and twisted. He couldn't breathe; he couldn't hear. The folds of his heart rose up over his sides.

No more. No more. If Ahden could turn off, so could he.

Siegel woke up smelling smoke. He remembered voices, his own and Saitoti's. He felt prickles of grass under his back and a fly crawling down his neck. He swatted it away.

"Siegel?"

He opened one eye, then sat up suddenly. "My God, Saitoti, what happened to you?"

Saitoti's face was puffed and swollen, one eye swelled completely shut. He was streaked with soot. Blood caked his thigh, his hand and his shoulder. Siegel looked at his own torn and sooty clothes. He wasn't hurt. He raised up on one elbow. The ruins of his home smoldered in the afternoon light.

"Ahden?"

"I am here. I am ... okay, for now. We have been waiting for you."

"Where are the dogs?"

"They're around, Siegel." Saitoti winced.

Siegel sat up. "What happened?"

"You went wild, Siegel." Saitoti's voice was flat. "Crazy with the demon, and violent and..."

"No," Ahden said, speaking through Siegel so Saitoti could hear. "I went crazy. It was me you fought last night. Ahden."

Siegel swallowed and stared at Saitoti. "I did that to you?"

"You and the dogs. They saw us fighting and ... I couldn't stop you, they would have killed me. If I'd been able, Siegel, I'd have killed them last night. I tried to kill you. You should know that, my friend. I tried to kill you."

Siegel stared at a tuft of grass, trying to fill his mind with nothing but one single blade. "I wish you had."

"Listen to me," Ahden said. "Whatever is wrong with you, Siegel, is not a weakness of the mind. You have one of the strongest, soundest minds I have ever come across. And it is not a demon. It is a physical thing, a chemical imbalance that affects your brain. It affects me the same way, you both saw that."

Siegel's face was white. "You mean, if I didn't have the imbalance, I'd be ... normal?"

"Yes."

"Yes!" Siegel ran his hand through his hair. "You can fix it then, can't you?"

"Siegel, I am sorry."

Siegel's hands stilled.

"I am aware of your physical functions. I can even encourage certain kinds of healing. But this is a delicate thing, a trace, a balance that I can just detect. I cannot regenerate something that never worked right in the first place. I have no way of fixing it."

"No way of fixing it. I see." Siegel looked at the ground. "You can't stay with me anymore. You know that. You'll have to find ... someone."

"No, Siegel. The rest you were able to give me ... it was something I have been needing a long time. I have remembered — how to be just me, how to go home."

Home. The word brought memories of a strange, lush and bronzed world, and three bright, inquisitive children. Siegel smelled something acrid and dusty. He saw fields of scrubby yellow plants, felt the press of family and friends, the ache of departure. The vision blurred with the faces of his own brothers.

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"Listen to me, Siegel. I can set you free. I can regenerate your mind like I do my own."

"But I'll still be Siegel. Crazy."

"No. You will leave the body behind, so you will leave the culprit behind also."

"It's terrible to want it, but ... someone is sick? Old and dying?"

"There is no one," Saitoti said. "No one close."

"We can look. Sooner or later, we'll find somebody. People die every day," Siegel bit the knuckles of his fist. "Can't do that, can we, guys?"

Saitoti would not look at him.

"Ahden, don't you think you can fight it? Just a few days?"

"Siegel. I have been fighting it. I am fighting. Hours, maybe. No more. I am sorry."

"I can't go back," Siegel put his hands over his face so Saitoti would not see the tears.

"There is another possibility," Ahden said. "There is the lion."

Siegel brushed tears off his cheeks, hoping Saitoti would not notice.

"The lion?"

Saitoti nodded. "The one you wounded. She is still alive. She has tried to hunt, but she's not gotten anything. We can track her, my friend."

"You mean, I'll be a lion?"

"Yes, Siegel," Ahden said. "I will stay with you long enough to make sure she heals properly. Then you are on your own. Or you can remain ... as you are."

Siegel shook his head. His eyes showed white and he gripped Saitoti's arms, looking at the rips in the flesh, wondering what scars would look like on that rich, black skin.

"I was going to write letters. To my family. I wanted them to come and see me. I was going to paint the house and get it so clean, like Mama likes. I was going to cook them dinner, and play cards with my dad."

"I just want them to see me like I should be. I just want to eat with them, and play cards."

Saitoti said nothing.

"Take time," Ahden said. "And think."

"I won't be human. I'll lose my mind, my memories."

"No. You will keep them, as long as you need them. Siegel, listen to me. Can you tune yourself to the small things? Smells in the wind, the sun on your shoulders."

"I don't know."

"Are they worth it? The little things? If you go back to the old way, can you live?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"I wish that I could."

"Saitoti. You tell me."

"God and the devil are one, my friend."

Siegel shook his head. "Ancient native wisdom, cryptic as hell."

"What will you do, my friend?"

"Go back to the pain. Take care of my dogs. Look after the cows. As long as I can."

"Siegel," Ahden said. "Will you at least agree to track this lion. See her."

"See her. Yes, I'll see her. We need to do that anyway."

Saitoti nodded slowly.

Theirs were the only shadows for miles as they moved through the tall grasses, going slowly in the heat. The sun

was high now, and the air shimmered with a hot purity Siegel had only seen in Africa. He saw an impala and turned to watch, but by the time he looked around it had faded into the landscape.

Saitoti moved carefully and methodically, legs stiff, muscles tense. He pointed. Fresh traces — they were close.

The vultures found her first.

The birds circled warily overhead and the lion snapped her jaws, then rolled her head back weakly. Siegel and Saitoti stood downwind fifty yards away. The lion struggled to her feet, but her legs buckled and she fell.

Siegel sighed. "She's had a long, slow time of it."

Saitoti shrugged. "It will make up for the calf."

Ahden tingled and shimmered in Siegel's mind. "She is not ready," he said. "But soon."

Siegel lay down in the grass. The sun burned his face. He pictured himself running across the plain, moving stealthily through the brush. He would lose his humanity. He would lose his brothers. But he would have the true Siegel, at last, and he would have Africa. He slept, and in his dreams he ran through the veldt on four legs. He woke at sunset to the throaty roar of a lion. He sat up and looked at Saitoti.

"Miles away," Saitoti pointed to the lion in the grass. "She hasn't even lifted her head." The roar came again, unbelievably deep and brusque. Siegel felt his stomach muscles tighten.

Their lion lay motionless in the grass. The sky turned orange, then purple, and Ahden told Siegel to get up.

"She is going. Best hurry. It is time for you to decide."

They approached slowly, but the lion did not notice. Her tongue lolled, thick and swollen, and her eyes were glassy and sad. The bullet wound in her shoulder bled and oozed under a thick, rough scab. Siegel felt a shudder of nausea and regret.

His mind was like her body — infected, weak and in pain. He knelt next to the lioness and felt the slow, weak beat of her heart. She did not want to let go.

They were both ravaged.

"The little things," he muttered.

"You have decided?" Ahden asked.

Siegel grabbed Saitoti's shoulder. "You've been a good friend."

Saitoti's eyes were huge. "And you."

"Would you take care of Jack and Crispin? Look after the cows?"

"Yes."

Siegel swallowed hard. "You'll be okay? You never took a wife. What about children, don't you want any?"

"Siegel, you know why."

"Because of me?"

"No father gives a daughter to a man who walks with demons."

"I'm sorry, Saitoti. Sorry."

"Do not feel bad, Siegel. Masai women are curious. They might not marry me, but I am welcome in their beds. It is enough."

Siegel smiled thinly and shook his head. He knelt beside the lion and touched her left ear gently.

They met again, the three of them, on a hill overlooking a gray-green veldt. It was late afternoon. The lion stretched and sunned her belly on the mound of a

freshly settling grave.

Ahden was leaving.

Siegel's shoulder had healed. A white scar puckered the joint, leaving a seam through the thick fur. Saitoti reached a tentative hand to touch the lion, and Siegel sat very still. He was not quite happy around men now. Saitoti withdrew his hand.

Siegel shook his head furiously; it throbbed with Ahden's leave-taking. And then the pain was gone. An arrow-shaped creature, shaggy with silvery fur, arced toward the sun, bursting heavenward like fireworks.

Siegel and Saitoti sat together for a long time afterwards, then Siegel rose and ambled down the hill. He turned before he was out of sight, roaring hugely, a sound of strength and well-being. Then he moved away in the tall grass, his tawny fur blending with the brown stubble, till it seemed to Saitoti that he disappeared into thin air. □

What is a SASE?

Many of our readers who would like to be writers do not know what a SASE is, or when it *must* be used.

We know, because our office is filling up with unsolicited manuscripts which were submitted without a SASE. A SASE is a self-addressed, stamped envelope included with a manuscript so that it can be returned if it is not accepted. A smaller SASE is used if you don't want the manuscript or art returned and simply wish a response. SASEs are also helpful if you desire an answer to a question you might have about the magazine.

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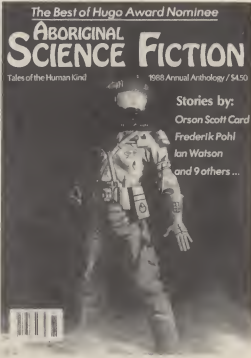
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New Writers

I don't mean to drag the Sharecropping/ Franchise- Writing argument on any further, but we are inevitably brought to the refugees from the Packaged Book phenomenon, that not quite endangered but certainly diminished species, the new writer.

New writers are unquestionably the lifeblood of the field.

That's the oldest gospel in criticism. (Yea, verily. *Platitudes* 2:12-13: The new shall replace the old with their freshness, for this is needful; and the old tend to drop dead and leave the pages blank; and no reader readeth blank pages.) But, in order to break out and establish any kind of reputation, a new writer has to publish his or her own material, not Asimov's *Robot City* novels or novelizations of recent movies.

For the very new writer, this is not a problem because, ironically, the sharecroppers only want writers with some track record. No absolute novice is going to be hired to write the works of a famous name, or do an episode of prose television. No, it is midlist writers who get buried in the Asimov or Clarke section of the bookstore, their by-lines completely interchangeable and unnoticed. And after a while, what readers they had begin to wonder whatever happened to Arthur Byron Cover or William F. Wu or Robert Thurston.

Gone, their careers on hold while they toil half-heartedly bringing in somebody else's crops. Happily, new writers can still get first novels into print. The apprentice system hasn't

taken over completely. In fact, the danger only begins to loom after the second or third novel. And, likewise happily, many writers are able to hold their own and go right on past that particular pitfall without stopping. It is still possible for someone to make the traditional leap from short stories to individual novels, or even to just start with novels. In fact, I am optimistic that the whole share-cropping phenomenon is but a dark cloud on the horizon, and will soon pass.

Let's look at some new writers.



Thomas the Rhymer
By Ellen Kushner
Morrow, 1990
247 pp., \$18.95

This one has already gained a considerable word-of-mouth reputation. Expect to see it short-listed for some award or other. Ellen Kushner is the editor of one well-received anthology, *Basilisk*, a handful of short stories, and a previous novel, *Swordpoint* (a non-fantastic "melodrama of manners" set in a non-historical Renaissance Europe) which has been praised

by fellow writers as illustrious as Gene Wolfe and Peter Beagle.

Here, clearly, we have a writer well set on her own path, who may well be a major figure in the field in just a few years. But I find that I don't like *Thomas the Rhymer* quite as much as I'm supposed to, possibly for that precise reason: I'm supposed to. It doesn't quite impress me as much as the popular wisdom says it should. But still, it's an admirable piece of work, a novel-length treatment of the legend of Thomas of Ercildoune, who (as celebrated in numerous songs and poems from the later Middle Ages) was such a fine harper that he was carried off to Elfland for seven years' command performance by the Queen of Faerie. I'm sure a lot of you have recoiled right there: Oh no! *Elves!* I can take anything but *elves*... Please God, no more *elves*... I understand the feeling. As a clever joke-cum-market-ploy, I am having a set of book-marks made up, which I plan to insert in every copy of my own titles that passes through my hands. It shows a disgustingly cute elf with a circle-and-bar imposed over the critter, and the legend says: "CERTIFIED ELF-FREE. Fantasy by Darrell Schweitzer." But let's be fair. The elves which have become the most dread of all fantasy clichés are not really elves at all, but *smurfoids*, cute little Disneyesque pseudo-hobbits completely cut off from the folklore, myth, and magic that produced them. It is the difference between fine wine in an exquisite crystal goblet and lukewarm Ripple in a Dixie cup.

The thing about elves, like wine, is that they can be dangerous. Proper elves, even as late as the purely literary creations of Shakespeare's day, are embodied nature spirits who, in pagan times, were nearly gods. They are human-sized or nearly so, amoral, unreliable, often cruel, and

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Rating System

☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆	Good
☆	Fair
	Poor

precedence not cute. To be in their presence can be a terrifying thing, a peril to both body and soul.

So it is for Kushner's Thomas, who begins as a callow young man with winning ways and loose morals, then is carried off to Elfland, and returns to repair the mess this episode has made of his life. He has learned sorrow and, most especially, the truth about himself and others, since the Queen has given him the gift of prophecy. (The real Thomas of Ercildoune, an actual historical figure of the 13th century, was indeed a famous prophet.) He lives fairly well, but not always happily, since he is able to foresee the deaths of loved ones. The Queen of Elfland returns for him at his own death.

It's lovely stuff, and in fact a specimen of a type of fiction which has almost become extinct: the non-generic, non-formula fantasy novel, intended for adults, not part of a trilogy. This is the sort of book many of us thought would flourish in the aftermath of Lin Carter's wonderful Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series. But instead it was banished to the outer darkness by the Del Reys and by Terry Brooks, and the *smurfoids* took over. Those of you who instinctively hate fantasy have good reason for doing so, but you've probably been programmed without ever having come into contact with the real thing. *Thomas the Rhymer* is the real thing. It belongs on the same shelf with Lord Dunsany, James Branch Cabell, James Stephens, E.R. Eddison, Ursula K. Le Guin, and the rest. It bears no particular relation to what Robert Silverberg once called "the X of Y Trilogy."

So, what's my problem with it? Purely novelistic matters. The story takes a long time getting started. It is told from the viewpoints of four characters, Gavin (an elderly peasant), Thomas (the Elfland sequence), Meg (Gavin's wife), and Elspeth (the girl Thomas deserts for seven years but eventually marries). Gavin's section at the beginning has trouble coming alive. In very subtle ways, Kushner fails to make her elderly male narrator real. After fifty pages of Thomas chasing skirts as told by this rather uninvolved peasant, the reader is left impatient for something to happen.

Fortunately it does. The Elfland section itself is very fine, and, true to form and source, Kushner weaves the

central adventure out of other ballad materials. In fact if you know your Childe Ballads, there's a whole other level of the story that will become apparent. (Although before you can say "The Trees They Do Grow High," you know what's going to happen when Thomas meets one of his now teenaged bastard sons toward the end.)

The writing is graceful, elegant, light, as Thomas's own songs and manner are, but it has a deep core. The critical cliché at this point would be that the style is distinctly feminine — but I am not sure there is such a thing as distinctly feminine writing — and that's why Gavin's section seems a bit dull. Safer to say it is distinctly romantic in the best sense, and Gavin is too much of a homebody to get caught up in the spirit of things. But the reader will.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Songs of a Dead Dreamer
By Thomas Ligotti
Carroll & Graf, 1990
275 pp., \$17.95

So far, Thomas Ligotti has had an extraordinary career. Virtually all his short stories — there have been no novels — have been published in the little magazines — *Nyctalops*, *Crypt of Cthulhu*, *Dagon*, *Dark Horizons*, etc. Of the nineteen items in the present book, only one is reprinted from a professional source (Jessica Salmonson's *Heroic Visions II*). Even "Alice's Last Adventure," acknowledged from Douglas Winter's *Prime Evil*, had its origins in the non-professional press. (Which is itself extraordinary. *Prime Evil* featured new work from Stephen King, Peter Straub, Clive Barker, and other heavies, but only Ligotti was allowed in with a reprint.) Normally this strategy would be the route to complete obscurity, but before long Ligotti was a kind of a legend, a latter-day H.P. Lovecraft who completely ignored the commercial markets in order to write his own, very unique fiction, which he would then toss away, with gentlemanly-amateurish naïveté, to any small-time editor who asked.

Sounds like the self-justification of a failed writer, right? Not in this case. It so happened that Ligotti was good and he was unique, and before long he was being praised by top writers and

editors. The present collection is an expanded, revised edition of Ligotti's first book, also entitled *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*, published by Silver Scarab Press in 1986 in an edition of 300 copies and already one of the great rarities of our day. (It's been called "the *Outsider* of the '80s," referring to the seminal, and very collectable, Lovecraft omnibus of 1939.) Despite everything, Ligotti's reputation continued to grow. It works out like this once in a generation, if that often.

Now that the general public can actually read Ligotti's tales, they'll find a decidedly odd writer, very different from the typical straightforward and visceral horror novelist. Ligotti is closer to Robert Aickman or Walter de la Mare than to Clive Barker, and *weirder* than either. His stories are best described as J.K. Potter photo collages come to life. There is relatively little in the way of ordinary plot or sympathetic, reader-identifiable characters. The prose is straightforward enough — very precise, with a normal vocabulary — but Ligotti will be for most a difficult writer, simply because it's so hard to touch down to our own experience in his stories.

But his fiction has the flavor of disturbing dreams. The images are fresh and startling. Consider, for instance, the character who takes a prostitute (literally) to heart. No explanation. These things just happen in Ligotti stories:

... But watch out for escapees.

Actually she made only a single attempt. It wasn't serious, though. A drunk I passed on the sidewalk saw an arm shoot out at him from underneath my shirt, projecting chest-high at a perfect right angle from the rest of me. He staggered over, shook the hand with jolly vigor, then proceeded on his way. And I proceeded on mine, once I'd got her safely back inside her fabulous prison, a happy captive of my heart.

("Eye of the Lynx," p. 99)

If you see this one on an awards ballot and you say to yourself, "Thomas *Who?*", Well, now you know.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Winterlong
By Elizabeth Hand
Bantam Spectra, 1990
440 pp., \$4.95

Now that we actually get to the one genuine first-novelist treated in this column, I am sorry to say that I found *Winterlong* almost unreadable. I did not finish it. My friend Henry the Dentist got further in than I did, and he too gave up, reporting that things got no better. I am very surprised. I picked this book to review because I thought I'd like it. The author has a good reputation for short fiction published in all the right places (*Pulphouse*, *Full Spectrum*, *Twilight Zone*), and *Winterlong* is included in the Bantam Spectra Special Editions line, a special preserve for literary, artistically ambitious rather than formula-product books. No generic trilogies or sharecroppings of famous names in the Spectra series, no indeed ...

But what I (and Henry the Dentist, the world's fastest and one of the less critical readers) found here is a novelist who has completely failed to master technique. Sometime in the future, after several revolutions, in the ruins of Washington, D.C. (I think), various persons are kept as prisoners/experimental subjects for their psychic empathy, which is used in a kind of psychotherapy. The empaths have virtually no personalities of their own. They are at best mirrors of others.

One of these empaths narrates, as you may well imagine, murkily. Scenes do not connect. Many make almost no sense because they are too dependent on made-up terms which are never defined. The character has no goal, but instead passively reports confusion. The story, in simplest terms, does not go anywhere, even after a hundred pages. You're still waiting for it to begin. And after a hundred pages, you wonder what you've read. Which is about as far as I got.

Henry the Dentist made it to page 150. We had a little discussion: Is there a publishable book here? He thought not. I thought it needed drastic cutting and restructuring, and then maybe. It shows every sign of being a substantial, ambitious work that just didn't come off at all. Sigh. (But definitely not Sigh Fi.)

Rating: ☆

The Mirrors of Hell
By Michael Paine
Charter, 1990
281 pp., \$3.95

Another not-still-a-first-novelist who has gotten little attention. This is actually Paine's third. His second, *Owl Light*, has a certain word-of-mouth reputation, but in general he's been buried among the look-alike horror books. But the publisher did one thing right. Copies were given away at the Brammies (Bram Stoker Awards banquet of the Horror Writers of America) this past June in Providence. So here goes:

The Mirrors of Hell shows Michael Paine to be a very competent writer.



He keeps you reading. He has the ability to make his characters real and interesting even when they are not sympathetic. He opens with slightly hostile Americans, an older woman, her adult son, and a lawyer the son's age, travelling to a remote nunnery in Morocco to find out what happened to the woman's older sister, who disappeared. They snipe at each other. The son is soon having sex with one of the nuns, who is also his first cousin, because it seems the Mother Superior is the long-lost American. In a diary which forms the central part of the story, we find out that Clare, the lost sister, was a brilliant artist of stained glass back in the 1920s, who was sent by her employer (Mr. Tiffany of New York, presumably *the* Tiffany) to gather shards of miraculous glass stained with the blood of saints and quite possibly with the blood of Christ

himself. Mysterious murders follow. As Clare gathers the broken glass from France, Germany, and Turkey, she, like Frodo Baggins, is changed and corrupted by the burden she bears. To approach the divine, we are told, is also to discover the satanic.

So, a horror novel of religion, devilry, and holy or unholy broken glass. ("A shattering novel" is the blurb writer's little joke.) On the plus side, it's very gripping, even subtle, anything but the more typical splatter-each-chapter-type horror novel. On the down side, Paine doesn't quite convince me that he knows his settings and material. I wonder: Shouldn't the Moslem nomads of Morocco be Berbers, not Bedouins? On page 50 there's an utter blunder: these isolated nuns have a special dispensation to care for their own spiritual needs. Well, maybe. But when a nun talks about saying mass and elevating the host, well, no. In Catholic belief, only a priest may consecrate a host, turning the bread into the body of Christ. Only a man can be a priest. A mass performed with a piece of bread isn't a mass, dispensation from Pope Honorius I or not. It doesn't work that way. There should have been a priest from a nearby monastery making deliveries.

Some of the period details of the 1920s section don't convince either. At Tiffany's mansion, Clare's boyfriend is lounging about in "only sandals and a pair of loose-fitting shorts" in the presence of none other than Governor Al Smith (the 1928 presidential candidate) and the Catholic cardinal of New York. Dorothy Parker and Lon Chaney Sr. are also present. They might not have minded, but the cardinal is a bit of a prig, and this is an era when a topless man could get arrested on a beach. Yet nobody says anything. On page 177 and following our heroes visit Berlin, which is described as having blocks and blocks of ruined buildings from the war. But Berlin didn't suffer any significant bombardment in World War I ... On page 223 someone envisions the Colossus of Rhodes straddling the harbor, a common misconception which I might otherwise be willing to attribute to the character's, rather than the author's, ignorance. And the style. Author's quirk. Writes in fragments. Sentence fragments. Quite a lot. The Clare/diary section repeats the same mannerisms found in the

frame narrative, telling us that the author has only one voice, and that this is high-level journeyman writing, but only that.

Rating: ☆☆☆

And now a word about H.P. Lovecraft:

The Conservative

By H.P. Lovecraft

Necronomicon Press, 1990

41 pp., \$5.95

One of my detractors once claimed I was incapable of writing a column without mentioning H.P. Lovecraft. Not true, but this isn't the column to prove it. One of the most remarkable things about the *Old Gent* is that after all these years (his centenary will occur about the time you read this) his work is still coming out. Lovecraft scholarship is beyond its infancy, but in the fifty-three years since his death can best be described as in its vigorous adolescence, still growing. Lovecraft is still coming into focus. The present

volume sharpens that focus by reprinting all of HPL's editorials from his amateur magazine, *The Conservative*, 1915-1923.

This is early Lovecraft, predating his major fiction. We find him a well-developed essayist and even a capable verse-satirist, shrilly commenting on the artistic, political, and social affairs of the day. By today's standards *The Conservative* is an amazing series of strike-outs. It doesn't come down on the wrong side of women's suffrage (or did I miss something?), but otherwise he is remarkably wrong-headed about just about every racial, political, or artistic question. Of course he, like Kipling, with whom there are similar difficulties, is a product of his time, not ours, and has to be judged that way. "Weak and pliant indeed," he writes, "is he who maketh no enemies."

Lovecraft believed in strict racial segregation on "biological" principles and the superiority of "Nordics" (all supported by what looked like the latest scientific evidence) and in

Prohibition, and he had little sympathy for those who wanted to keep America out of World War I:

After the degrading debauch of craven pacifism through which our sodden and feminised public has lately floundered, a slight sense of shame seems to be appearing ... (p. 15)

Or, better yet:

Horatius at the bridge in-trepid stands, /A branch of olive in his gentle hands, /Th' Etruscan host draws near, and with pride /The manly hero bows and steps aside! (p.14)

Or, on now classic literature:

Behold great *Whitman*, whose licentious line /Delights the rake, and warms the souls of swine; /Whose fever'd fancy shuns the measur'd pace, /And copies Ovid's filth without his grace. (p.8)

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Later in life Lovecraft would look back and say, "What a pompous ass I was!" But the odd thing is that we don't lose our respect or affection for him reading *The Conservative*. When he turns to "the realization of man's utter insignificance" against which

human life is "but a matter of a moment in unbounded time; the merest incident in the history of the universe" we see his distinct indifferentist/materialist philosophy already on place. His various tirades become those of a dear and dotty

elderly relative and, in the great scope of things, hardly matter. But beneath the dottiness there is a very real intellect at work.

Rating: ★★☆☆



ABORIGINES

By Laurel Lucas

Startling Glimpses

Shake 'em up. That's always been a credo of science fiction writers. In this issue we serve up a generous portion of disturbing scenerio with a side order of comic relief.



Lois Tilton

In "Life Support System" by Lois Tilton, medicine's noble attempt to save more premature babies creates an ethical nightmare.

Tilton was the author of "To Dust" in the Nov.-Dec. 1989 issue. I spoke to her while she was attending Chimera, a Chicago-area convention, where she was invited to read from her works and sit on some writers' panels.

Her first novel, *Vampire Winter* (Pinnacle), came out last December. She has stories appearing in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Sword and Sorceress* anthologies this year and next, and she's working on a fantasy about the Norse gods.

Tilton says she likes to get up in the morning, expel the kids from the house, then sit down to her computer. But she's had to trade in her vintage computer for a new one after it finally died, the apparent victim of a lightning strike.

"Life Support System" is illustrated by Wendy Snow-Lang. She and her husband Charles Lang were headed to NECON in Bristol, Rhode Island when I

spoke to her.

Snow-Lang has three comic book stories under her belt, two of them for Fantaco Company's *Shriek* magazine. She said she was in the midst of negotiating a



Rory Harper

large project to take up "all my time."

In the pet department, Wendy says she



has been babysitting a friend's canary and rehabilitating a sparrow that she found all covered with "sticky stuff."

In "God's Bullets" by Rory Harper, two post-holocaust space miners find a reminder of the Earth and the beliefs they lost. Harper is the author of "Regeneration" way back in our second issue (Dec.-Jan. 1987). In the three years since then, he has left his job with an oil company to write full time and take care of his two-year-old daughter. And his first novel, *Petroglyphs*, was published by Baen.

He is now in the middle of writing a novel called *Star Road Walkers*, which he called "a mishmash of eight different Heinlein juveniles that I'm getting out of my system."

He says he still plays in a blues band whose members include Steve Gould and Brad Denton. They play "mutated blues,



Wendy Snow-Lang and Charles Lang

bizarre country and western and off-the-wall rock and roll," mostly at conventions in the Southwest.



Daniel Keys Moran

"God's Bullets" is illustrated by Charles Lang. Lang is busy on a number of projects, including several magazine covers. Look for his work on the latest and forthcoming issues of *Cemetery Dance*.

Lang is also our cover artist, illustrating "Given the Game" by Daniel Keys Moran. Moran's tale explores the horrifying idea that there exists an alien being so powerful that in a single stroke it could make the ideal of survival through peaceful coexistence meaningless.

Moran says "Given the Game" is the first short story he has written in eons. His latest book, *The Long Run*, sold well, and his next book, *The Last Dancer*, is a sequel of sorts. He's also written a screenplay called "Street Angel."

Moran is married to Holly Thomas, who has a short story appearing in *Weird Tales*. His sister Jodi Anne Moran wrote a scene in *The Long Run* and has a first book out titled *Devlin's Razor*. The Moran siblings are putting together a comic strip called "The Sunset Strip" featuring the



Lynn S. Hightower

adventures of two actors named Joe and Mondo Cool.

A man with mental problems searches for peace in Africa in "The Undiscovered Country" by Lynn S. Hightower.

Hightower is a full-time writer whose latest novel is titled *In the Dark Backward*. Her story "Daddy's Coming Home" is part of *Women of Darkness II*, and her story "Wheaton" is appearing in *The Gate*.

She says she's now caught up in writing police procedural science fiction mysteries, and is working on one set in the year 2040.

She is married to Scott Hightower, "a brilliant electrical engineer," and she enjoys hiking and canoeing, with or without her kids.

"The Undiscovered Country" is illustrated by Carol Heyer. Heyer was recently nominated for two Chesley awards from the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists. One was for her children's book *Beauty and the Beast*. The other was for an interior painting she did for the *Aboriginal* story "Jim-Bob and the Alien" by Vivian Vande Velde and T.



Carol Heyer

Serio (May-June 1988).

Heyer's other illustration for that story was our cover, and that was awarded a certificate of merit by the Society of Illustrators at an art show. Heyer has been working on paintings for her next children's book, *Excalibur*. Her work is now being carried by Bush Galleries in Carmel, California and Dover, Massachusetts.

If you suspect NASA has a knack for making things more complicated than they need to be, you'll appreciate "Henry, Have You Gone to the Moon?" by Steven Forstner.

Forstner, alias "the Phantom Scribbler," says this is his first published piece of fiction. He recently completed a stage play called "Gizmo's Girl," and he was working on two short stories titled "Heaven on a Trashcan" and "Cybercat."

Speaking of cats, the Michigan author says he recently potty trained his cat, Mystik Varlet.

"Henry" is illustrated by Carol Heyer. The protagonist in "Serving the Market" by Steve Benson finds a new use



Steven Forstner

for computers that any frustrated computer user will appreciate. Benson also happens to be a computer salesman.

He's just completed a novel called *Dark Circle*, and he's working on another about computers that begin to design software and society.

Benson says he took part in a personality improvement course through work and found out his biggest flaw is that he is too cynical. (And he thought writers were supposed to be that way.)

"Serving the Market" is illustrated by Pat Morrissey. Morrissey is moving to Long Island to pursue more cover work in New York City and to work with her sister, an artist who specializes in *trompe-l'oeil* for interior decoration. The sisters have styles that blend well, she says.

In the meantime, she has done covers for *The Wraith of Time* by Andre Norton (Tor), *Snow Queen* by Joan Vinge (Easton Press), *What Might Have Been?*, an anthology edited by Gregory Benford and Mar-



Steve Benson



Pat Morrissey

tin H. Greenberg, and some work for Pulphouse, among other things.

This issue's poem, "Mist Gathering," is by David Lunde, who has made many appearances in *Aboriginal* over the years, starting with our second issue.

Awards

The University of Kansas has announced the winners of the John W. Campbell Award, named for the late editor of *Amazing Science Fiction* (later *Analog*), and the Sturgeon Award, named for the late science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon.

Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* won the Campbell Award for the best science fiction novel of the year.

Michael Swanwick's "The Edge of the Worlds" won the Sturgeon Award for the best short science fiction story of the year.

Swanwick's story "U F O" appeared in the Sept.-Oct. 1990 issue of *Aboriginal*.

Other award winners:

K.W. Jeter, *Farewell Horizontal* second place, Campbell Award.

John Kessel, *Good News from Outer Space*, third place, Campbell Award. Kessel's poem "Mr. Hyde Visits the Home of Dr. Jekyll" appeared in the Mar.-Apr. 1989 issue of *Aboriginal*.

Megan Lindholm, "The Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man," second place, Sturgeon Award.

Bruce Sterling, "Dori Bangs," third place, Sturgeon Award.

James Patrick Kelly, "Dancing with the Chairs" and "Faith," honorable mention, Sturgeon Award. □

BOOMERANGS

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I just got back from a week at the beach to find a copy of *Aboriginal SF*, a message from a friend on my answering machine saying that Darrell Schweitzer was libeling me as "Quintus Blaster" in *Aboriginal SF*, and a letter from Darrell, enclosing a copy of the essay, and explaining that he used the "Quintus Blaster" pseudonym to avoid possible embarrassment to me.

I wish he'd checked with me ahead of time, because I'd have told him to use my name if he wanted to talk about me. I have no use for pseudonyms, either for essays or for their targets. I do, however, request room for this reply.

Darrell explains in his letter to me that he can't remember the title, but the book in question was "my most recent Baen novel (the one that came out in about April)." My most recent Baen novel came out in August of 1989, so Darrell either has the season wrong, the publisher wrong, or, just possibly, the author wrong.

But that really isn't the question. (I learned a long time ago with Darrell that he's not the type to let facts get in the way of a good story.)

I write a lot of books. I've edited quite a number of books; sometimes by myself, sometimes with one or two other editors. I've edited and been written in shared universes (today's mail brought a comfortable royalty check for *Thieves' World* stories I did about a decade ago). And I've collaborated with a number of people, in a number of different ways.

Collaborations range from me doing the complete rough draft, to me doing 120 pages of connected outline from which other authors will write three novels, which I will then edit. There have been "I write a chapter/Collaborator writes a chapter" books, and once I was rewrite man on a politician's manifesto (and was listed as co-author).

I collaborate and edit for fun, the same

reason I scripted a graphic novel and have done various other things. I'm paid for all these projects, but the money is nothing compared to what I get for solo novels.

And on that subject, both my advances and my sales on solo novels have skyrocketed at about the time I started doing the collabs and editing. I'm not saying there's a direct connection. I'm saying there isn't a negative connection, as Darrell falsely states.

I'm not sure why Darrell would think there was a negative correlation. Some years ago a Tor editor discussed with me Darrell's proposal to write a Conan pastiche for them. The book Darrell planned to write would have been a perfect example of anything-for-a-buck publishing (the sort of project to which Darrell refers as Share-Cropping the Dead, if I remember correctly). Even so, he knew that his payment and sales figures on such a Conan novel would be far higher than those for anything else Darrell has written in a career as long as mine.

There's a very serious problem in the SF field, but it wasn't the one Darrell sees (and perhaps the place his head is wedged contributes to his astigmatism). The problem is that the mass of readers doesn't want a classic, they want something new — and they don't care if the new item is good, bad, or indifferent. This disturbs me a great deal, because I grew up with the field and I love the best of the stories I read when I was starting out.

A professor friend of mine who teaches college SF courses (and has a Nebula of his own) tells me that his students refused to read classic Heinlein; they wanted *To Soil Beyond the Sunset* in the curriculum. The head of a major SF program told me that her sales force was meeting serious resistance in trying to remarket a hugely-successful (and excellent) classic from the mid-'60s. Robert E. Howard reissues sell no better than Conan pastiches.

Comments From Our Readers

And Arthur C. Clarke's name on a new Gentry Lee book sells a hell of a lot better than a reissue of *Childhood's End*.

Books sell to readers. Readers in SF seem to be turning their backs on the classics that are the core of the field. I'm not talking about one dentist, who may or may not have picked up a book and wondered if it was by David Drake. I'm talking about across-the-board sales figures in NYC science fiction publishing.

I'm doing what I can from where I am. I've edited a number of anthologies that are heavy on classic stories. (Stop ten people in the hallways at the next con you attend. Ask them if they've read Van Vogt's "Black Destroyer". Then, if you're like me, ask them why the hell they haven't.)

In addition, I've made (with Jim Baen's somewhat bemused help) a personal crusade of keeping as much of Sprague de Camp's best work in print as possible; even to the extent of writing a de Camp pastiche for, I assure you, less than my going rate.

As for the rest of you — point people to classics. Tell them about *Dune* and *A Case of Conscience* and *The Undesired Princess*.

And if you haven't read "Black Destroyer," the story from which the Gold on Age of SF is dated — read it, dammit.

Sincerely,

David A. Drake
Chapel Hill, NC

Dear Editors,

I enjoyed Robert A. Metzger's column "Don't Talk to My Grandmother." However, I thought I should point out that all of the tiny distances are missing a minus sign in the exponent. That is, the Planck distance should be 10^{-33} cm.

Sincerely,

Ruth Kastner,
Greenbelt, Md.

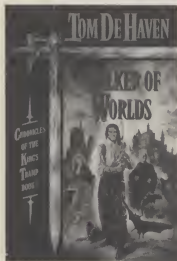
(You are absolutely right. But it was our typo, not Bob's — Ed.) □

A Step to the Side

Walker of Worlds

By Tom De Haven
Foundation/Doubleday, 1990
288 pp., \$19.95 hc, \$8.95 pb

Many parallel-world fantasies depict the experiences of characters



from our world in the fantasy world, or vice versa. It's more unusual to find one that deals with both, and I've never seen it done as well as Tom De Haven has in *Walker of Worlds* (the first volume of *Chronicles of the King's Tramp*).

Trouble has arisen in the world of Lostwithal, where the Mage of Four, Mage of Luck has created the Epicene, which, if allowed to become fully

grown, will unleash chaos and destroy the worlds. Jack, a Walker, discovers this secret, and while waiting until he can inform the King, comes to our world to hide from the evil mage. He quickly begins collecting allies in our world, starting with Geebo and Jere Lee, both homeless. Geebo has his own demons pursuing him, and his and Jack's tales soon grow together.

De Haven integrates the fantasy and real worlds well, and doesn't go for the obvious Oz/Kansas contrast — there's plenty of evil in the fantasy world (though I didn't like the too-obvious parallelism of names between the two worlds). He does a beautiful job on the characters and our world. We don't see that much of Lostwithal, but the glimpses are fascinating; Jack's world is truly alien. The writing sings.

The plot hinges on a detail in our world that I can't give away, but which I found highly implausible, especially considering the realism of the rest of the depiction of our world. It feels like an incongruous detour into fantasy in the wrong world. The ending is a bit unsatisfying, leading as it does to the rest of the trilogy, but it's no cliffhanger.

Walker of Worlds is beautifully written and constructed. It's complex and sometimes hard to follow, but it more than repays the effort.

Rating: ★★★★★

Terraplane

By Jack Womack
Tor, 1990
227 pp., \$3.95

Jack Womack's *Terraplane*, though incontestably science fiction, was originally published as a mainstream hardcover; now Tor has released it as a genre paperback. The cover material contains endless comparisons to *A Clockwork Orange*, but

it isn't much like Burgess's dystopia at all. It's a carefully written, bleak, and violent novel of alternate history.

In the near future (or a near future; it's hard to tell whether it's an alternate timeline, though I suspect so), retired general Robert Luther Big-



gerstaff is in Moscow to kidnap a scientist for the corporation that controls the U.S.; to do so, he must get around the corporation that now controls the Soviet Union. In the process of escaping, Luther and his companions are forced to use the invention in question, a device which takes them near New York in an alternate 1939. The characters spend most of the novel trying to get back to their original time.

Let's get the *Clockwork Orange* comparisons out of the way. The most notable feature of that book is its brutal, senseless violence. *Terraplane* does involve a lot of killing, but none

Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

of it is senseless; the characters may treat life as cheap, and may even enjoy killing at times, but they kill only when they have to — they don't go wilding. Womack's descriptions of violence also don't have much in common with Burgess's pornographic explicitness. While the comparison may have helped mainstream audiences get a handle on this work, it's a disservice to SF readers.

One surface similarity to *A Clockwork Orange* is the use of an invented dialect of English. The language seems to have evolved from bureaucratese; nearly every noun can be converted into a verb, and the speakers never use a short word when a long one will do (e.g., something isn't "needed," it's "essentialized"). While

to that timeline, a disease with some awfully convenient side-effects such as accelerating her brain so she can solve the problem in time. The characters are also fortunate enough to happen to land near the World's Fair right before Tesla shows up with his big coil, which also happens to be synchronized with a thunderstorm, providing the energy the characters need in order to escape (shades of *Back to the Future*). There are also some less crucial coincidences, such as the characters' arriving just in time for a performance by one character's favorite blues singer.

But it's the details of this grim world that matter, and the wonderful characterization. The most depressing thing is that it doesn't seem that Luther's world is any better than ours; it may even be worse, although we see so little of it directly that it's hard to tell. *Terraplane* is a powerful novel with much to say about our own timeline.

Rating: ☆☆☆

In the Country of the Blind

By Michael Flynn

Baen, 1990

527 pp., \$3.95

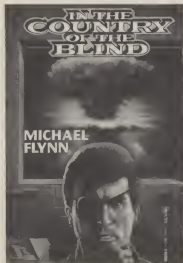
Scientific prediction of human behavior, such as Isaac Asimov's "psychohistory," is a familiar theme in science fiction. Michael Flynn brings a new twist to the idea: such a science (here called "cliology") does not lie in the future, but was developed in the early nineteenth century and kept secret. In *In the Country of the Blind*, this intriguing premise is sandwiched into the familiar suspense plot of the innocent person accidentally caught up in deadly machinations, and a well-executed version of this plot it is.

A group of scientists and thinkers developed and applied cliology using Babbage's Analytical Engine, a primitive digital computer wrongly believed by most people to have been unworkable. It wasn't long before their study led to intervention, as they were unable to resist the urge to improve the future. Unfortunately, their knowledge was imperfect, and mistakes could have disastrous results. Eventually the group split, with one faction restricting itself to study while the others continued their interventionist work, though no longer with altruistic motives. Sarah Beaumont, a real estate developer in the near fu-

ture, innocently stumbles onto evidence of cliology's existence, and is caught in a deadly struggle between the two factions.

Flynn's premise is a good one, and it's developed well and convincingly. There is too much lecturing, especially early in the book, as Flynn establishes who his historical villains are. I disagree with some of his interpretations, but that's a sign of a successful speculative book — you want to argue with it. I could probably write an essay about my objections; it's rare to find a novel so intellectually stimulating.

Flynn's villains are one-dimensional, and I'm getting tired of characters' evil nature being demonstrated by their sexual perversions, but I like



easily decipherable, the dialect takes some effort getting used to.

Unfortunately, the early chapters in Moscow are very slow and hard to get through, which makes the language a much bigger obstacle; I would have given up on the book had I not been assured that it was worth it. And it was: once the characters get to the alternate 1939, the book takes off and becomes impossible to put down. Womack creates a frightening and mostly believable version of this country's history, where slavery existed until 1907 (Lincoln was assassinated before he could take office, as was FDR). Much of the book is spent exploring it, and this world is drawn in disturbing detail.

The plot seems almost an afterthought. Womack leans too much on convenient coincidence. One character comes down with a disease unique



the heroes, Sarah in particular. (She is a strong, competent black woman, which makes it disappointing that Baen gave the book a cover featuring a white man.) The plot is exciting, fast-moving, and complex, but rarely confusing. The ending is a disappointment: though the characters' personal problems are resolved, the overall problem is not. I don't know whether Flynn intends a sequel, but I hope not; the book doesn't need one.

In the Country of the Blind is fine speculative science fiction and a suspenseful thriller. It will pull you in, and, more importantly, it will make you think.

Rating: ☆☆☆+

Night Watch

By Robin Wayne Bailey

TSR, 1990

311 pp., \$3.95

Robin Wayne Bailey's *Night Watch* is a fascinatingly frustrating book. This fantasy/police procedural has many good points that almost sink out of sight among the bad ones.

Garett Starlen is the commander of the night shift of the City Watch in the city of Greyhawk. He has to solve a series of crimes in which all the seers in the city are being killed by their own magical instruments. Starlen must also deal with evidence of human sacrifice by a cult, and nearly impenetrable political tangles.

The first few chapters are boring and poorly written, and I almost put the book down permanently. Once the police procedural gets underway, though, things pick up. Transplanting this form of crime fiction into a fantasy world is difficult, but Bailey pulls

Too much about Burge, Starlen's half-elfen deputy, is told, not shown, and the other characters are left sketchy. The constant insult-trading of his subordinates, which we're told is just good-humored teasing, quickly becomes grating.

The writing, after the first few chapters, is generally fine, although it exhibits occasional carelessness: a couple of times, the author seems not to be aware that he's already told us something. The book's ending is too obvious; the villain's identity is supposed to be a surprise, but he's been acting so sinister that it isn't one. Also, Bailey uses that silly cliché of

the villain explaining everything to the hero before killing him.

There are some original elements hidden in all the generic muck, and if Bailey could just shed all the sword-and-sorcery interchangeable parts he's picked up and handcraft a novel, he could produce interesting work. *Night Watch* is so flawed that the good parts may be seen by very few people.

Rating: ☆☆☆

The Oxygen Barons

By Gregory Feeley

Acc, 1990

272 pp., \$3.95

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it off. Unfortunately, we soon get a boringly familiar Quest for the Magic Dingus, and at that point the book deteriorates.

While the police procedural is clever, the fantasy setting is generic. Greyhawk feels like *Thieves' World* with the serial numbers filed off and is filled with D&D races (elves, halflings, orcs, dwarves, and their half-breeds), most of which conveniently leave town early in the book, letting the author concentrate on humans. The successful pieces of the novel indicate that Bailey is capable of developing an original setting; his failure to do so severely damages the book.

I like the protagonist a great deal, and the political maneuvering is good.

The newest Ace Special, Gregory Feeley's *The Oxygen Barons*, is a lively novel that attempts to pack too much in. Action, suspense, politics, terraforming, computer simulations, physical modifications, and other elements mix to form a tantalizing but overly complex plot.

Galvanix (the silly pulp-SF name is deliberate) is a citizen of the Lunar Republic, which is unrecognized by any of the Earth and Earth-orbit warring powers. The only thing those powers can agree on is a total embargo of the Moon, a restriction that includes information. When Galvanix goes on a mission to break up an ice chunk hurtling toward the Moon, with the assistance of the enigmatic Taggart (a representative of one of the powers; we don't know which), he is

much characterization of Galvanix because we don't get very deep into his head, making it impossible to understand what he feels. Though not the viewpoint character, Taggart is somewhat better characterized.

The plot — as far as I could follow it — makes sense, although it relies too much on lucky coincidence for the protagonists. The end is abrupt and pat. The situation is still an atrocious mess at the end of the last section of the novel, and then, in an epilogue set later, Feeley tells us, "Well, everything's settled and it's all OK." I found this quite frustrating.

As I've said, there are a lot of flaws in *The Oxygen Barons*; perhaps Feeley tried to juggle too many things. But it is exciting and involving, and features some amazing images. Though not wholly successful, the novel is certainly worth your time.

Rating: ☆☆☆+

The Eternal Enemy
By Michael Berlyn
Morrow, 1990
323 pp., \$22.95

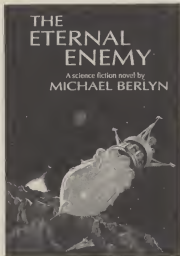
In *The Eternal Enemy*, Michael Berlyn takes a crack at the challenging problem of depicting extraterrestrials who are truly alien. At this he succeeds, although the novel in which the aliens are embedded is flawed. It is, however, fascinating and suspenseful.

Markos is a crew member on a mission to the planet Gandji, following up a manned probe that never returned. As expected, the humans discover intelligent alien life: the Habers, a peaceful race with an amazing ability to create deliberate mutations in their offspring. The paranoid Captain Van Pelt becomes convinced that the Habers are dangerous and determines to wipe them out. Markos, the only crew member willing to oppose him, must flee; when his escape vehicle crashes, the Habers save him from certain death by engineering him a new and grotesquely alien form. He soon finds out that he is vital to the survival of the Habers — and humans — against the Hydrans, an implacable and ruthless race bent on conquest.

The plot is sometimes hard to swallow. For all the psychological testing and control NASA does, it seem to produce mighty unstable astronauts

(although given recent developments at that agency, maybe that's not so unbelievable). I don't understand why everyone but Markos goes along with Van Pelt in his — they know — mad desire to destroy the Habers. I also find the reason the character Catherine Straka later pursues Markos across the galaxy both clichéd and not credible; it might have worked better if we'd gotten to know Straka earlier. In fact, that's an essential problem with the middle section of the book. We are confronted with a bunch of characters we haven't met before, except in the most superficial ways, and now we're supposed to understand their personal interactions and care about the mess they find themselves in.

The solution to the problem of the



hurled into a life-and-death adventure which will lead him on a trek across the far side of the Moon, to space, and beyond.

The politics are exceptionally confusing; the main character doesn't quite understand what's going on, and he's still better off than I was. I eventually gave up trying to follow the machinations and just let the book carry me along. There's a real sense of wonder to Feeley's inventions: the steam telephone, the orbital habitat, the partly terraformed Moon.

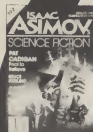
Feeley's writing is generally smooth, but the dialogue is horrendously stilted, especially during the first section of the book. It reads as if everyone is reciting lines, not as if these were things people might actually say. This problem irritated me and kept thrusting me out of the novel. There is not



Hydrans makes sense and grows out of the rest of the story, while not being obvious or expected. The ending does seem anti-climactic, though. Berlyn's writing is uneven: smooth in the opening section, very clumsy in the middle, smoother again at the end.

The Habers are a convincing and different alien race. By putting a human in an alien body, Berlyn solves the problem of giving us a human viewpoint while avoiding having aliens who are really humans in funny costumes. We never completely understand the psychology of the "real" Habers, so alien are they. My one complaint is with the Hydrans: why are implacably violent alien races so often insectoid?

The Eternal Enemy has wonderful aliens in an interesting, but flawed



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and unsatisfying, novel. I enjoyed the book, but I wish there was more to it.

Rating: ☆☆☆

In Between Dragons

By Michael Kandel
Bantam/Spectra, 1990
192 pp., \$3.95

Michael Kandel's new fantasy, *In Between Dragons*, is an odd novel. Though marketed to adults, it reads like a Young Adult novel — and not a great one. Though it is often interesting and funny, its themes seem after-school-specialish.

Sherman Potts is a teenager with a messed-up life who finds his escape in McGulveyland, a fantasy world he can travel to whenever he wishes. As if

ticularly original, work because of the author's sense of humor, but I never got caught up in them.

It's hard to care about Sherman, who's whiny and obnoxious, and you can't care that much about the individual adventures because you know they're not "real," even in the context of the novel. It seems to me that all the worlds falling apart is too harsh a punishment for Sherman's pursuing a normal adolescent curiosity about sex; the apparent moral is not one I approve of.

In Between Dragons, while often interesting, is not ultimately successful. Kids might like it better than I did, if they don't find it too preachy. In any event, I'd recommend reading it just for the dragons of Cuspidor.

Rating: ☆☆☆

After Magic

By Bruce Boston
The Eotu Group, 1990
54 pp., \$5.00

After Magic is a short fantasy novel by Bruce Boston, published as an illustrated chapbook. This tale of Stephan Yarrow's search for true magic, and his entanglement with the semi-fraudulent medium Madame Tutoni, is engaging and interesting, but sometimes obscure. Boston displays a grotesque wit and produces some fine description and enjoyably odd characters. The writing could have been more careful, though. The artwork, unfortunately, is terrible; among other problems, the characters, as drawn, don't even look the way Boston describes them. *After Magic* is worth reading, but flip past the illustrations.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Recent graphic novels:

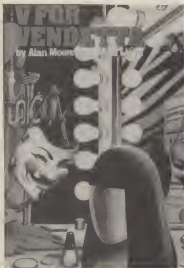
V for Vendetta

By Alan Moore and David Lloyd
Warner, 1990
286 pp., \$14.95

Alan Moore's Hugo-winning *Watchmen* caused me to rethink my prejudices against comics. *V for Vendetta*, a collaboration with David Lloyd, demonstrates once more that graphic science fiction can be a legitimate and powerful art form.

V for Vendetta is haunting and beautifully done near-future SF depicting a post-World War III England ruled by a fascist regime. (Since it was written over seven years, and some of the story's history takes place in what is now the past, it might now be considered alternate history.) The masked figure known only as "V" is a terrorist working to undermine the rulers. I can't go any further in the plot without spoiling some of the author's surprises.

The novel is detailed and exciting, with characters you care about. It depicts a very English kind of fascism, and is politically subversive in its use of Guy Fawkes (a subtlety which will be lost on most Americans). There are many clever and believable touches; for example, on every post sporting a



McGulveyland (named for its proprietor) weren't enchanting enough, the books in McGulvey's library are also magic, taking Sherman into their fantasy worlds. When Sherman introduces a new element to the library, these worlds start to fall apart, and the effects spread to McGulveyland and even, it seems, to the "real" world.

The parts of the book that take place in Sherman's real life are clichéd and not always believable. McGulveyland is marvelous and beautifully detailed. My favorite of the adventure books is the one set in the city of Cuspidor, where Sherman must fight dragons who are killing the populace by discharging toxic waste and manufacturing hazardous consumer products. The other adventures, though not par-



surveillance camera, a sign is hung reading "For Your Protection."

Graphically, *V for Vendetta* is impressive, and Lloyd's art is just right. You can see many of the cinematic techniques which would serve Moore so well in *Watchmen*. Unfortunately, since some of the original chapters were in black and white, they have been colored for this publication, and the coloring is bad — muddy and poorly registered.

V for Vendetta deals soundly with issues of revolution; destruction vs. creation, and anarchy vs. authority. While it didn't quite knock me out of my chair the way *Watchmen* did, it's solid, creative, enthralling, and very much worth your time.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

William Gibson's *Neuromancer: The Graphic Novel*, Vol. 1

By Tom De Haven and Bruce Jensen
Epic Comics, 1989
Unnumbered, \$8.95

Tom De Haven (whose novel is reviewed above) and Bruce Jensen have done a remarkable job translating *Neuromancer* into graphic form. William Gibson, in the introduction, says it looks like his book, and it certainly does. However, by its nature it cannot include the rich detail of the original novel.

Despite that lack, and my strong support of original forms, I enjoyed this book and felt it added to my experience of having read the novel, bringing it back vividly across the years since that first reading. I would not recommend it to people who haven't read the novel yet; in addition to being a lesser experience, I suspect the adaptation would be confusing.

The artwork is terrific, bringing the book to visual life. The characters look right (I appreciate that Molly is not drawn as a beauty), the cityscapes are noteworthy, and the depiction of cyberspace is impressive. I hope De Haven and Jensen can keep it up for the rest of the novel.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Adele & the Beast
By Jacques Tardi
NBM, 1990
48 pp., \$9.95

Adele & the Beast is an English translation of the first volume of "The Most Extraordinary Adventures of Adele Blanc-Sec." It's an attempt to combine science fantasy with the suspense novel, set in 1911. In this volume, Adele tangles with a newly hatched pterodactyl under the partial mental control of a scientist.

Despite its lovely turn-of-the-century ambience, the book didn't work for me. The plot is confusing and disjointed, relying partly on a past history that we have no way of knowing. There are lots of characters to keep track of, and too many are drawn similarly. The plot is also extraordinarily silly. I'm not sure why, but while I might have gone for a pterodactyl egg that just happened to hatch, the mind-control aspect pushed me over the edge of suspension of disbelief. Maybe it would work better for other readers, but I recommend passing it up.

From the Bookshelf

Rating: ☆☆

2001 Nights, #1
By Yukinobu Hoshino
Viz Comics, 1990
80 pp., \$3.75

2001 Nights is a series of short SF stories originally published in Japanese. The first issue features gorgeous art — it even looked good in the photocopied advance copy I got. Unfortunately, the stories don't live up to the artwork. If, as the promotional material claims, Yukinobu Hoshino is the "Godfather of Japanese science fiction comics," then they're not in very good shape.

The four stories are weak, pulpy, and predictable, reading like less-

than-classic '40s SF. For example, "Posterity" has an idiotic premise. I can accept the reasoning behind sending out only sperm and eggs on an interstellar voyage, but I refuse to believe that anyone in his right mind would send the sperm and eggs from only one couple. No one would start a colony with such a small gene pool, and it wouldn't be stable.

I don't know whether the future stories in the series get any better (we are promised a total of nineteen, to appear in ten issues). I'm not counting on it, though. If I receive any further volumes, I'll probably just look at the pictures.

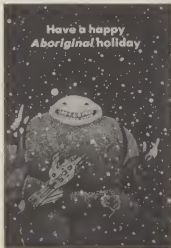
Rating: ☆+

□

Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* (Jan.-Feb. 1991) will feature cover art by David Cherry, illustrating "The Transformative Ethic" by Doug Franklin. The Jan.-Feb. 1991 issue will also include a novelette, "Singing the Mountain to the Stars," by Howard V. Hendrix, illustrated by Wendy Snow-Lang, and the following short stories: "The Holes Where Children Lie" by *Aboriginal* regular Patricia Anthony, "Hell on Earth" by John Moore, illustrated by David R. Deitrick, and "Appliance" by Bruce Bethke. And, in an *Aboriginal* first, we will have a double play by Sandra Paradise, who wrote and illustrated "The Honeymoon." The issue will also have our regular book reviews and feature columns.

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On Autopilot

Are you a conscious, self-aware individual?

Don't answer so quickly.

First consider this.

When I drive to work, I always follow the exact same path. From my apartment in the San Fernando Valley to the Hughes Research Labs in Malibu is 15.8 miles, if I travel the back roads through the Santa Monica Mountains, which take me down Topanga Canyon, Mulholland, and then Malibu Canyon. Yesterday morning, I had three letters I wanted to drop off at the post office, which is half a block from Topanga Canyon. This would take no more than a few minutes. No problem, I thought. So I hopped into my car, cranked up the radio, and pulled out.

I arrived at the labs about 25 minutes later.

I had not mailed the letters.

For a moment, I just passed off that minor lapse in memory as due to insufficient caffeine in my system, but then realized not only had I forgotten about the letters, but I had almost forgotten about my entire drive into work. My memories of the last 25 minutes were worse than somewhat blur-red — for the most part they simply didn't exist.

I could barely remember anything.

I had some vague recollection of having passed a cement truck on Mulholland, seeing several galloping horses in a large corral, and even swerving around some good-sized chunks of rock strewn across the road in one of the narrow passes in Malibu Canyon.

But that was it.

I had just driven a couple of tons of metal and synthetic leather seats at speeds up to 80 miles per hour (I'll deny that if this column falls into the hands of the California Highway

Patrol), and could remember no more than a few seconds of it.

I had driven to work on autopilot, for the most part completely unaware of everything that had taken place. And I'm sure that you've done the same. Think about it. Just how much of your day is spent in this autopilot mode?

Can you remember eating breakfast last Wednesday?

Can you list the programs that you saw on television last night?

Do you really remember walking to the refrigerator to get that snack, or did you just mysteriously find yourself there and figure that since you were in the neighborhood you might as well finish off that half-eaten pizza?

During those bouts of autopilot are you really self-aware, or just a piece of organic hardware that's driven by a bunch of action-reaction responses that center around collision avoidance and the acquisition of food, sleep, and sex? And if you assume that the answer to that question is yes, what sort of tasks can you perform during that autopilot mode — just how complex can they be? (My example of driving a car may sound fairly complex, but please remember that I drive in Los Angeles, where it is a law that drivers remain unconscious — it cuts down on freeway shootings.)

These are very similar questions to the ones that Rodney Brooks of the MIT Insect Lab began to ask of himself several years ago.¹ As a new member of the expansive artificial intelligence (AI) group at MIT, he was looking for a different way of approaching the problem of how to implement autonomy in a robot — i.e., the ability of a chunk of hardware to wander around unaided, interact with its environment, and just possibly get some

task done that may be useful to its human masters before those humans die of old age. Conventional wisdom in this AI arena holds that autonomy is a five-stage process. First, the robot must perceive its environment. This can be done with any type of sensor, ranging from cameras to sonar or even pressure transducers, all of which allow it to identify the objects around it. The second step in this process is for this information about its environment to be passed on to its brain, where that information is used to build a model of its environment. Once the model is in place, it must reason about that model in order to construct a plan for accomplishing its goal. Once the plan has been made, the robot must then figure out how to execute the plan by issuing whatever specific motor commands are required to activate its various appendages. And last, after all this is accomplished, it can actually do something.

That's a lot of work.

But that's exactly the standard approach: perceive — model — plan — execute — do. If you think about that for a moment, you should probably see something very familiar in this process. This is the way you could accomplish a task — but only when you are in your conscious mode — when you are actively thinking about it, usually when you are encountering a problem that you've never faced before.

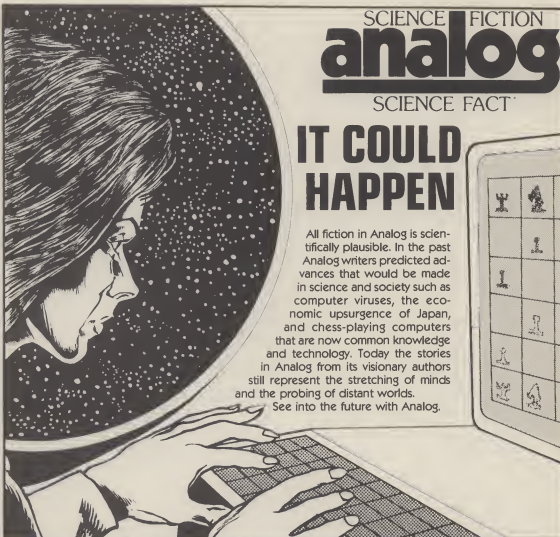
So, is there another way?

Autopilot. I do it every morning when I drive to work — and I believe you do, too. Imagine what would happen if we had to follow the above procedure for everything that is actually required to get a car from home to work. By the time we had

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started at our car keys, absorbed the complete environment of the car, and then modeled the environment which would allow us to realize that the key would fit into the door lock and figured out all the internal commands to insert the key, and then actually to unlock it, it would probably be time to come home from work.

We would simply be overloaded if we had to be conscious of everything we do. It's for this very reason that the type of autonomous robots that MIT builds, those that model their environment and attempt to be conscious, require Cray-like supercomputers simply to crawl across a room.

Brooks figured that there must be a different way. He wanted to make a robot that didn't try to mimic a human conscious mind, but instead, an autopilot mind — the type of mind that he believes we may be using for most of what we're doing.

He asked himself how much he could remove from the conventional AI-type robot and still have something that can operate in the autonomous mode. He wanted to find out what kind of robot could be built if the model/plan/execute portion of the standard AI procedure was completely removed, and only the perceive/do portion remained.

What would you have?

Insects.

Think about it. Take a cockroach, for example. In essence, it does not have a brain. But it can get along quite nicely in your kitchen, finding food, hiding when the lights are turned on, multiplying at an impressive rate, as well as possessing the uncanny ability to avoid your shoe heel.

It does all this based on a few very simple rules. Rule number one is to wander around. It does not have to map its environment, create a model, and then implement a plan. No. It just wanders around in a random fashion. It stumbles across things. If it's that old crumb of chocolate cake that was dropped between the stove and refrigerator last spring, then it eats, or if it's just a cockroach of the opposite sex that it encounters, then it does whatever's required to insure the survival of the species. The few other rules that fill its little brain

are those that deal with avoidance. If light comes on, then it runs. If something moves, creates a stir of air, or casts a shadow, it runs. That's basically it. (For simplicity I've ignored the insect's use of pheromones.) Wander and run.

This is the approach that Brooks and his co-workers have taken. But don't be fooled by the simplicity of this approach. They're not just trying to make better cockroaches, they are trying to build something much more sophisticated, something eventually as sophisticated as you and your ability to autopilot your way to work every morning.

So what have they actually done? Genghis.

It's got six legs and is about as big as a good-sized rat. It has 57 behavior circuits — and that's what sets it apart from its more conventional AI siblings. It does not try to think. Almost all of those circuits are used to control and activate its legs and detector whiskers. As an example, if Genghis starts climbing up and over an object, it does not perceive/ model/execute the object and its relationship to it. No. Each leg knows how to walk (that's what one of those behavior circuits is used for), while a tilt sensor within it will cause various legs to be retracted or extended to keep it from falling over. It does not have to know about the concept of falling down as a result of tilting too far over; it simply obeys the rules hardwired into its behavior circuits. The result is that it can easily climb over a book — accomplishing its task without knowing what a book is.

Once over the book it continues on its way, obeying the few rules that fill its head — rules such as walk, or turn, that do not require any thought on Genghis's behalf since its legs know how to walk. Think about that for a moment. When you walk across a room, do you really think about what your legs are doing? Are you continually giving them commands, telling them to move this way and that, for your knees to bend, your ankles to pivot? No. You just walk. You have your own behavior circuits that allow you to walk without requiring any conscious intervention on your part.

"So what?" you might be asking.

What has the Insect Lab created

except for the mechanical analog of a bug? Don't we have enough organic bugs wandering around?

Yes.

But these are more than just the sort of bugs that you'd find walking around your kitchen in search of the remnants of last week's pound cake. Right now, the Insect Lab is working on the son of Genghis — Attila. Like his father, he's six-legged and bug-like, but possesses a type of rotational symmetry that no organic bug has ever possessed. If Attila does tip over, and lands on its back, it's not stuck. It possesses special hip joints that can rotate completely around — allowing it to turn its top into its bottom and its bottom into its top. But it's not just its legs that can do this. All of its sensors, including its camera eye, can rotate around its body. It is completely symmetrical. It has no top and no bottom.

Again you may be saying, "So what?"

This is what the Insect Lab is thinking about: Mars.

The Mars Rover as currently planned is a tank-like device that will weigh hundreds, or possibly thousands, of kilograms, stuffed with the best AI available. It will cautiously move its billion-dollar self across Mars, knowing that if it tips over, or gets a tire/leg stuck anywhere, that its mission is over. For the same cost, dozens, if not hundreds, of Attila-like robots could be deposited on Mars. Each would have a few sensors, like cameras, soil samplers, or atmosphere sniffers, and they would be let go. They would wander, relaying data back up to Mars orbit where it would be stored and then sent back to Earth. They'd move across Mars with the same ease with which a cockroach navigates around your kitchen, or just as I make my way to work. They'd have absolutely no idea what they were doing, or why they were doing it. They'd have no objectives or goals. They'd simply wander. And if they fell over, they could right themselves. If they scurried off a cliff, and got themselves splattered, that would not threaten the mission. If you'd started with 100 Attilas, you'd still have 99 left.

The mindset that reflects this approach is fundamentally different from the current AI techniques. Big-

ger is not better. Smarter is not better. Complex is not better.

Imagine what the future might bring if the direction in which the Insect Lab has started moving is realized. What if? What could an army of mindless bugs do if they had just a few specialized behavior circuits placed in their almost nonexistent brains? Imagine a world 100 years from now where automatic high-level AI robot factories (operated by a conventional AI-type robot) do nothing but build these bugs. Millions are built, billions are built. They're powered by sunlight and don't pollute. They are everywhere, as common as flies, cockroaches, and ants are now. What few specialized behavior circuits would you place in them? How about some that when they encounter trash, pick it up and don't let go of it until they wander across a trash receptor? Or there is an oil spill (that is, if there is any oil left in 100 years), and aquatic bugs are dropped into the sea. They are told to eat oil and regurgitate it when they wander across special regurgitation sites. Bugs could selectively remove pests from crops, keep every window in the world sparkling clean, mow every lawn, fill every pothole, explore the solar system, pull every weed, seal every leak, clean carpets, dig up dinosaur fossils, wash cars, find old dump sites and eat centuries-old diapers, or just hide in dark corners, watching you, and then report back, purging their recorders of everything you did.

What do you think?

How would you use an army of mindless slaves?

I know how I'd use mine. I'd have them take me to work. I'd have several thousand of the little guys crawl over each other, locking together, and transform themselves into a type of bug-mobile — something that could do 80 miles per hour over Mulholland. Then I'd sit back, enjoy the scenery, and hope that none of them gets a yearning for a chunk of petrified pound cake.

¹ M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Science*, Vol. 248, 1990, p. 959. □

By Charles C. Ryan

Editor's Notes



The best thing that can happen to you is to make a mistake. When you make a mistake, you have an opportunity to learn and improve. This is equally true for a society. How a society (or its subunits) copes with its problems and errors will pretty much determine whether it survives, and how well.

While the society of Japan leaves much to be desired for most Americans brought up to appreciate independence and the right not to conform, it currently has a good system for solving problems in the workplace.

There, if an employee thinks of a way to solve a work problem or to improve an industrial process, he or she puts the suggestion to the company. Suggestions that work are used and the company benefits, as does the individual — who receives a bonus.

Compare that to what too often happens here. In the July-August 1990 issue I explained we were using plastic baggies to protect subscribers' magazines from the high-speed machinery used by the Postal Service. Without the baggies, magazines are mutilated and often devoured.

Shortly thereafter we received a letter from a postal worker who said he would not renew his subscription because he was tired of seeing the Postal Service criticized. It's unlikely he sent a copy of that criticism to the Postmaster General to see if the problem could be solved. It's unlikely because he would probably be ignored. I've worked at a number of places where the suggestions and ideas of employees are routinely ignored — even when they make perfect sense and could save thousands of dollars and hours of time. While there are some exceptions, most organizations here seem to think if the idea doesn't come from the top, it's no good.

Around the same time we got that letter about the postal service, another bureaucracy announced that the Hubble telescope was hobbled because no one had tested a testing instrument to see if the idea doesn't come from the top, it's no good.

And just this week a local company pleaded guilty to falsifying test data on electronics equipment in the B1B bomber (good luck to the pilots in Saudi Arabia if they have to use *that* equipment). In that instance, the bosses ignored repeated concerns raised by employees that the testing wasn't completed.

Maybe someday, when we as a culture realize ideas have value regardless of the source, NASA will get a space program that will let us all go to the moon, and we won't need baggies.

Until next time ... □

Dementos



Since it's bucketing along toward the season to be merry (which means my husband will begin cursing the few who do not know that he abominates greeting cards and who will get them back postage due), I thought I'd offer you a few stocking stuffers you might rationally miss if it weren't for my eagle eyes and nasty sense of humor. You know the sort of movies. You sneak down the stairs at four in the morning, catch them on the sly in a sleazy theater that smells of dead bacteria, then deny everything, even under threat of thumbscrews. You know the type: B-features, demento movies hawked each year in the basement at the Cannes film festival. The Guilty Pleasures. Dementos.

This year, my Christmas present to you is to give you a berserk look at the latest releases in theaters and on video around Christmas. Fair warning—these movies tend to slither into movie houses by the back door, play a limited release of two hours, then appear on video the next day. They also have an advertising budget of something around \$4.21 and food stamps. Compare this with the summer hit *Dick Tracy*, which cost an inexpensive thirty million dollars to make but had an impressive thirty-million-dollar advertising budget. (The reason for the high advertising costs is that the studios make 40 percent of their total revenue for the year in that first film-going month. The philosophy behind this large expenditure is that you'll eat, drink, and wear *Dick Tracy* for the month of June and love it. The rest of the year you'll be shaking off the DT's.)

You won't see McDonald's one-million-dollar scratch-off cards for these movies.

One film company that seems to specialize in today's B-feature is



Metamorphosing aliens

Troma. Its latest film list includes the soon-to-be classics *Croaked: Frog Monster From Hell*, *Dialing for Dingbats*, *Evil Clutch*, *Nightbeast*, *Rabid Grannies*, *Stuff Stephanie in the Incinerator* (okay, sometimes the boundaries of good taste may be stretched to the limit), *Subhumanoid Meltdown: Class of Nuke'Em High, Part II*, *Video Demons Do Psychotown*, *Toxic Avenger IV: Mr. Toxie Goes to Washington*, *Star Worms II: Attack of the Pleasure Pods*, and my fave, *A Nymphoid Barbarian in Dinosaur Hell*.

I see Troma as a company with paisley wallpaper.

Advertising the B-feature seems to rely on a tongue-in-cheek approach and imaginative PR campaigns. Since we're in a devil-may-care kind of mood, match these descriptions of some of the Troma films to their titles:

"During a family get-together, two grandmothers are transformed into hideous monsters."

"A look at the bizarre and wacky world of telephone party lines."

"Treasure hunters on an isolated island encounter the island's slimy, monstrous, frog-like guardians."

"When your wife and best friend are after your hard-earned money, there's only one thing left to do..."

"Readin', writin', and radiation move on to higher education."

Have I beaten you into submission yet? No?

The "Times Square Freak Twins" (one is disturbed, the other grotesquely disfigured) are back in *Basket Case 3*.

H.P. Lovecraft stories are continually being resurrected for films, as in *Shatterbrain*, in which a doctor tries to help a friend stop a spell that has raised the dead.

Pet problems seem to be the theme in *Brain Dead*, when a boy's mother is turned into a zombie by a Haitian rat monkey.

For those of you with an interest in the biological sciences, look out for *Metamorphosis: The Alien Factor*, in

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A Great Lineup

Now starting it's fifth year, *Aboriginal* has a whole line-up of stories coming your way from contributors who include Hugo and Nebula Award-winner Frederik Pohl with "The Matter of Beaupre," "Appliance" by Bruce Bethke, "The Larkie" by Phillip C. Jennings ... and we have stories by Patricia Anthony, Robert A. Metzger, Howard Hendrix, Wil McCarthy, Chuck Rothman, John Moore, Ann K. Schwader, Nina Kiki Hoffman, Gail Regier, Joyce Jensen, and Lois Tilton and many, many more in upcoming issues.

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which dabbling with alien cells causes a mutant to bite a scientist, turning him into a monster.

Continuing the trend of hiring third-rate scientists who can't keep their experiments under control is *Shadowzone*. The above-mentioned zone and its antisocial inhabitants are brought back into our dimension — the end result is mayhem.

You've heard of *Robocop*; now in *Vice Academy, Part 2*, meet Bimbocop, "one-half woman, one-half robot, and twice the killing machine."

I was a Girl Guide; I don't make these things up.

Although this is just the tip of the iceberg, I can sense you screaming, "Enough! Give us real movies!" Sometimes culture is not enough; you've got to have entertainment. To that end...

There's a new breed of writer in town, and he is fully armed. After years of hearing how actors and directors have been pocketing millions for each picture, it's finally time for the one-million-dollar writer.

Three of these prized screenplays have fantasy elements in them; all seem to be, in one way or another, buddy movies. The first, currently untitled, written by David Mickey Evans (his one million includes the directing fee), and bought by Peter Guber and Jon Peters (Columbia), is about two abused brothers who create a fantasy world to escape in.

The second, written by Brian Helgeland and Manny Coto, is called *The Ticking Man*. In an interview in *New York* magazine, Helgeland describes the premise of *The Ticking Man*: "It's five years into the future and we have negotiated a big disarmament treaty with the Russians. The government has developed a robot (the Ticking Man project) who looks and acts like a normal person but who has a nuclear warhead in his chest. They've decided to dismantle him, but what no one realizes is that the ticking man is now thinking for himself. Before they can dismantle him, he escapes and tries to go to Moscow to explode himself. The government brings in our hero (Bruce Willis) who's a genius who worked on the project and became friends with the robot. From then on, the movie is a big chase with Willis trying to stop the ticking man."

Rounding out the trio is *Prince of Thieves*, written by Pen Densham and John Watson, yet another version of the Robin Hood story.



Take that, *Star Worms*!

On the subject of fair pay for the creator, Dean Koontz's well deserved book-to-screen success continues with *Midnight*. As reported by Paul Nathan in *Publisher's Weekly*, Dean Koontz will stand to net more than \$600,000, plus a percentage of the profits from his screenplay. *Midnight* is scheduled to be released by Paramount.

Women writers will have a strong showing next year with two novels being made into films. Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*, about a carnival family who, in order to save costs, decides to breed their own freak show, has been optioned for film rights. Work is underway on *Mary Reilly*, by Valerie Martin, a retelling of the *Jekyll and Hyde* classic from the point of view of Mary Reilly, the maid. Roman Polanski is directing, with Jack Nicholson in the starring role.

Now some old favorites. Jim Varney's Ernest is having real estate problems in *Ernest in the Haunted House*, from the Buena Vista company. Scheduled for production are a new James Bond film from MGM/UA; *Spaceballs III: In Search of II*, produced by Mel Brooks (now's your chance to take advantage of that 2-for-1 lobotomy sale); and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure II*, reteaming Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter. *Bill and Ted* has a scheduled release of 1991. From Warner Bros., *Batman II*, *Lethal Weapon III*, and *The Fugitive* (you remember the series) are set to go into production. *Tales from the Darkside II*, *Star Trek VI*, and an untitled Eddie Murphy western are on Paramount's schedule.

Barbie's main squeeze, Chucky, is back in *Child's Play II*, starring Alex Winter and Jenny Agutter. Scheduled opening date is November 2. *Bride of*

Re-Animator opens in theaters on November 9, while *The Gate II* has an opening date of October 12.

Future film news includes rumblings of a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* feature for sometime around the middle of the '90s and another *Dick Tracy* movie from Disney. Robert Cormier's 1988 novel *Fade* has been optioned by Steven Spielberg and Amblin Entertainment. Cormier is best known for his novel *The Chocolate War*.

Amblin Entertainment and Disney are also planning another *Roger Rabbit* feature. One possible storyline contender could be the second *Roger Rabbit* novel *Who P-P-P-Plugged Roger Rabbit?*, currently being written by creator Gary K. Wolf.

For fans of this year's *Robocop II*, the good news is that Frank Miller, who wrote No. 2, has signed to write the third one. (For movie buffs, Frank Miller has an untitled part in *Robocop II*: he's the twitchy scientist in Cain's truck experimenting on a new variety of nuke. As with all of Cain's employees, there's not much chance of job advancement. He ends up in several million barbecued bits.) Miller is also writing an original screenplay for Silver Pictures.



Making an offer

Not really in the fantasy category, nonetheless eagerly awaited, is *The Godfather, Part III*, with the heavyweight talents of Francis Ford Coppola, Mario Puzo, Al Pacino, Diane Keaton, Eli Wallach, Talia Shire, and Andy Garcia. It's my best bet for the holidays.

See you next year.

Troma films quoted in order: *Rabid Grannies*, *Dialing for Dingbats*, *Croaked: Frog Monster from Hell*, *Stuff Stephanie in the Incinerator*, and *Subhumanoid Meltdown: Class of Nuke 'Em High, Part II*. □

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Life Support System

By Lois Tilton

Art by Wendy Snow-Lang

Andrea Newcomb flexed her fingers in the surgical gloves, took a deep breath, then stepped through the doors of her private scrub room into the sterilizing light of the operating theater. Figures, masked and gowned, turned in her direction, waiting. Andrea stepped to the table, briefly checked that the patient was ready, vital signs stable. She looked up at the dozen residents and observers surrounding the table. Most of them would have to view the procedure on the overhead monitors. The microphone picked up her voice:

"The patient is Louise Paulsen, thirty-three years old. Interductal carcinoma, previously in remission, has recurred with involvement of the axillary nodes, necessitating additional chemotherapy. Fetal age is sixteen weeks."

Mrs. Paulsen's obstetrician had spotted the recurrence of breast cancer. It was the estrogen-receptor type, almost certainly brought out of remission by this pregnancy, which he had warned her against attempting. A year earlier she would have faced the choice of abortion or subjecting the unborn child to the teratogenic effects of chemotherapy. Now there was an alternative.

Andrea looked around the table to make sure her team was in place. Noah Kim gave her a thumbs-up sign that the FLS tank was ready. Mrs. Paulsen's doctor stood in the back with the residents, glad to have a chance to view the procedure. The patient's abdomen was exposed, framed in sterile drapes. It was still almost flat at this stage of the pregnancy.

Andrea's surgical laser traced a line across the skin while her calm voice over the microphone began to describe the method of incision for the observers. The procedure itself was not complicated for an experienced obstetrical microsurgeon. The hard part had been the years while she and Kim struggled to perfect the artificial placenta. Now, working confidently, she exposed the uterus, still only about twice its normal size.

The laser cut again, through the uterine muscle. There was the amnion with the shape of the fetus inside, not much more than 100mm in length. The observers strained forward for the best view from the monitors as Andrea opened the membrane, spilling clear fluid. This was the crucial part of the procedure, interrupting the flow of blood between fetus and placenta. Speed was almost as essential as a steady hand.

Working under the surgical microscope, she secured the cord and located the umbilical vein. With a skilled microsurgeon's touch she inserted a wisp of tubing, its diameter almost impossibly small. Next, the umbilical arteries, one by one, placing the catheters with painstaking care while mentally counting down every second.

As soon as the tubes were in place she clamped the umbilical cord, and simultaneously Kim released the valves of the FLS tank. Immediately the tubes darkened, filling with fetal blood. Circulation had been established between the fetus and the artificial placenta.

Andrea let out a breath. Her scrub cap was damp with sweat across her forehead, but her eyes were gleaming with the knowledge of another success. A resident stepped in and cut the now-redundant cord while Andrea lifted the fetus from its mother's abdominal cavity and placed it into the waiting tank. As Kim and his technicians took over, one of the nurses announced the official time of birth: 9:47 a.m.

And Kim looked up from the FLS tank where the infant floated, tethered by the tubes to the life-giving artificial placenta. "It's a boy."

Still in her scrubs, Andrea stepped into the waiting room. "The procedure went well," she told the anxious family. "Mrs. Paulsen is in Recovery now. You'll be able to see her in about an hour — Mr. Paulsen," she specified, forestalling a parade of relatives.

"And the ... baby?" the husband asked uncertainly.

Andrea smiled. "He's been transferred to the Fetal Life Support Unit. You'll be able to see him today, too, from our observation room."

"A boy?"

"That's right. You have a son, Mr. Paulsen!"

Andrea still felt the same sense of elation. The first successful procedure had been not much more than a year ago, but otherwise, how things had changed! On her way back to the FLS Unit she paused to look out a window at the construction site where they were building a new wing onto the hospital, an FLS wing with an eventual capacity of three hundred tanks.

Currently the Unit had forty tanks. Andrea stood in front of the glass of the observation room and watched the forty fetuses floating tranquilly in the dim red light. A technician noticed her and moved to stand aside so she could see, but Andrea waved her back to her job. There was the tank labeled PAULSEN, the tiny organism inside drifting peacefully, apparently unaware of its change in environment.

The courts had ruled earlier in the year that the FLS babies were legally born at the moment the umbilical cord was cut. Andrea had opposed that position. Physiologically, she had argued, they were still fetuses. It was the whole point of the Fetal Life Support program, to save the infants too young to survive on their own. The digestive organs, kidneys, and especially the lungs of these babies were still undeveloped. None of them could have been able to breathe unaided by a respirator. But in the FLS tank they retained placental circulation; the ductus arteriosus still connected the chambers of the heart, bypassing the immature lungs. Babies that would have either died or faced months of struggle in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit were now floating peacefully in a tank that duplicated as closely as possible the conditions of the uterus.





People had called her a crusader during the years she and Kim struggled to perfect the system, but Andrea had not let the criticism stop her. This was her reward.

All forty tanks were full now. Yesterday's release of the Sullivan baby, a healthy, full-term girl, had finally freed a unit for the Paulsen fetus. Andrea grimaced when she thought of the three weeks Louise Paulsen had waited, three weeks while the cancer continued to spread unchecked through her system.

Cases like hers were always hard. There was Mrs. Ruiz, now first on the FLS priority list, on the waiting list for a heart transplant, too.

A door opened behind her, and Andrea smiled at the sight of Noah Kim and his glaring yellow slacks. The medical engineer came to stand next to her at the observation window and announced cheerfully, "That's ninety-seven. One hundred, soon. We ought to start thinking about a celebration."

Andrea nodded pensively. "It looks like this one will be all right. It was a tough wait. I almost thought about going to Helen."

Kim shook his head. "She would have turned you down. That's why you picked her for this job in the first place."

To avoid even the most remote possibility of conflict of interest, Helen Makovich, the FLS Unit's head neonatologist, had absolute power to say when each baby was ready to come out of its tank. Andrea grinned ruefully, knowing Kim was right. Already she was thinking about Mrs. Ruiz and wondering when the next tank was going to be free.

"Some day, though," she said, thinking of the new wing. Some day only a few years away there would be enough units available to spare everyone this anguish.

Kim gave her shoulder a brief squeeze. They had developed the artificial placenta together, a partnership of two decades in which Kim had been the one to never show a moment's doubt.

Andrea looked in at the Paulsen fetus again. "I suppose he was one of the lucky ones, after all."

She showered, changed into her working clothes, and soon she was sitting down at her desk with an oversized mug of decaf. The size of the office, like the private scrub room, was a mark of status at University Research Hospital. Part of the paycheck after fifteen years of scrounging for grant money, working with Kim to cobble their first prototype together, testing the early models on rabbit embryos, then moving up to chimps and finally their first success on a human fetus.

There was a pile of mail on the desktop. She glanced at it warily and noticed the bright polychrome cover of the magazine at the bottom of the stack. Curious, she pulled it out. Not a medical journal, that was for sure, not with that picture of military robots on the cover. *Future Magazine* — her interview must be in this issue!

Andrea opened it and found the page with her picture. She stared at it, touching a finger unconsciously to the lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, unfortunately visible in the photograph. At least the few gray strands in her hair hadn't shown.

She turned to the body of the interview, skipping the introduction. The writer had been a man named Bertinelli, with firm ideas of his own about what *Future's* readers wanted to know.

Future: So, Doctor, do you envision that someday soon women won't have to get pregnant? That we'll be able to grow a baby from conception to birth in the lab?

NEWCOMB: I can conceive of the possibility, of course, but I don't think it's likely in the near future. There's a period from the time the embryo becomes implanted in the uterine wall until about two months, when our current technology just doesn't apply. The artificial placenta requires a developed circulatory system in the fetus.

Future: You don't find the concept disturbing, then, that women might someday be replaced by machines?

Andrea recalled that her actual answer had been, "What I really find disturbing is that you can equate a woman with her reproductive organs."

But the magazine hadn't printed that. She read on:

NEWCOMB: No, the idea doesn't bother me at all. In many ways, an FLS tank is a safer environment than the uterus. The tank isn't going to drink too much or mainline drugs or contract a sexually transmitted disease.

Future: It sounds as if you agree with the feminists who call the FLS tank the ultimate phase of women's liberation.

NEWCOMB: Well, they predicted the same thing when the first contraceptive pill was developed, too.

Future: What about the abortion problem? They're saying the tank is finally the solution. For the first time in fifty years both sides on the question are in agreement.

NEWCOMB: Obviously it provides an alternative. It certainly eliminates the basic conflict between the mother's body and the fetus's life. But even when we do have more units available, six months in a tank is going to be expensive. How many mothers will be able to pay half a million dollars just to avoid the inconvenience of pregnancy? How will the insurance companies react? Someone is going to have to solve these problems before you can talk about an ultimate solution.

Andrea pushed the magazine away. People were only interested in what they wanted to hear, not what someone had to say. Her descriptions of the babies on respirators in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, the twenty-week preemies who died after weeks of futile heroic efforts, the real reasons behind the development of the artificial placenta — none of it was in the interview. Bertinelli had only been interested in whether the FLS system would liberate women from pregnancy and eliminate the controversy over abortion.

Abortion. The activists on both sides of the perennial abortion controversy had jumped feet-first into the act as soon as they realized the implications of the FLS program, united for once in a common cause. Not since the AIDS vaccine had there been such political pressure behind a medical development.

Andrea had hardly been in a position to object. She actually had more grant money at her disposal right now than she could use. But with the funds had come strings, demands that the project achieve results on other people's agendas.

Her pager pulsed on her wrist. She answered, and heard Helen Makovich's voice.

"Andrea, could you come down to the Unit right away?"

"Trouble?"

"It's the Paulsen baby."

Andrea hissed breath in through her teeth. "I'll be right there."

Helen was standing in front of the Paulsen tank, frowning at one of the monitors. She looked up gravely, stepping away to let Andrea take her place. "Take a look. The eyes."

In the monitor's screen the 112mm length of the Paulsen fetus was enlarged to the size of a full-term infant. By sixteen weeks the eyelids of a fetus have normally fused shut. Andrea focused on the blank convexity, frowned as Helen had done, and looked up at the other doctor with a sense of dread.

"Microphthalmia."

"Damn!" Andrea's curse was heartfelt. Sometime in the crucial early weeks the fetus's eyes had failed to develop properly. And there was probably worse. This type of deformity was usually associated with other problems.

"You've ordered a scan? A complete Faulkner screen?"

Helen nodded. "It doesn't look good. Scan shows signs of intracranial calcification."

"Brain damage," Andrea said hoarsely. Something cold and heavy was lodged in her throat. Oh, God, she was going to have to tell the Paulsens! Ninety-seven fetuses in the tanks, and this had never happened before. They had run all the usual tests before accepting Louise Paulsen into the program, to rule out genetic problems, viral infections, other abnormalities.

How could I have missed it?

Helen read the stricken expression on Andrea's face. "You probably wouldn't have been able to tell, even if you were looking for it. Not there in the operating room. There was nothing you could have done!"

Andrea tore her gaze away from the tank. Nothing she could have done. No screening process could be perfect. It had only been a question of time until the odds finally caught up with her.

"What do you think are the chances that the screen will give us a cause?" she asked finally. The Paulsens would be asking her, why?

"I don't know. But it might be tomorrow before I've got all the results, whichever way they go."

And the confrontation could not be put off until then. Mr. Paulsen would be coming to the observation room to see his son.

The man was sitting across from her desk, pale with shock. Andrea could see how the weeks of anxiety and waiting had worn him, the lines of worry on his face, the way his hands shook. "You mean it's going to live, don't you?"

"I believe so, yes," Andrea didn't try to pretend this was good news.

"Blind, retarded!" Paulsen's voice was harsh with anguish. "Three weeks we waited! Three weeks!"

It was in his eyes, in the raw desperation of his voice: Why?

"Mr. Paulsen, there was just no way anyone could tell! We did every test we could. Your own doctor did tests. We had no reason to believe your baby wasn't perfectly normal until Dr. Makovich performed her examination."

"My wife might die, you know that? We waited three weeks for a chance to save the baby! And now, this!" He shuddered, on the verge of breaking into tears. Andrea

waited tensely, hating this, wanting it to be over.

"What happens now?" he asked bleakly.

"I'm afraid there isn't really anything we can do, other than monitor the situation as your son develops, to determine the exact extent of the damage."

"Develops into what? We could have had an abortion, three weeks ago!" Paulsen cried. "Why not now?"

Why not, indeed? The extent of the defects would have justified an abortion regardless of Louise Paulsen's health. What difference should it make that the fetus had been transferred from her uterus to an FLS tank?

But Andrea knew well enough to keep such thoughts to herself. The law's position was clear. An attempt to terminate the Paulsen fetus now would produce an immediate lawsuit from the vigilant anti-abortion groups, possibly even a murder charge. "Mr. Paulsen," she said, "I'm sorry, but the courts have tied our hands."

There were only so many times she could say she was sorry. She wished there was something else she could say, something she could do to really help the stricken man. "I'll be with you, of course, when you're ready to tell your wife," she finally said.

As soon as Paulsen had left her office, her comm-unit light went on.

"Excuse me, Doctor," her receptionist said, "but Doctor Feldman wanted you to know as soon as possible. Mrs. Ruiz's condition has deteriorated, and they've decided to drop out of the program."

"Thank you," Andrea replied automatically. At twenty weeks, it would be a Cæsarian for the Ruiz fetus. It might even survive in the Neonatal ICU. But the odds were that even so it would end up no better than the Paulsen fetus, irreparably damaged by the very treatment that had saved it. Just because there wasn't an available tank.

Suddenly it struck her. There was a tank. The Paulsen tank. It wouldn't suffer. All she would have to do was shut off a single valve. Most people would probably consider it an act of mercy. Why not? A healthy life against a blighted one.

The choice seemed so clear. A single valve, an easy, painless death. Against two blighted lives.

With startling insight, Andrea realized there might be another way. Not termination, not so directly. But it might be possible to transfer the Paulsen fetus out of the FLS Unit to the NICU, to vacate the tank that way. If Helen Makovich agreed ...

She wanted to jump up and run out of her office after Paulsen. It took a physical effort to remain at her desk. The whole thing was impossible. There were ethical considerations. She almost laughed aloud at the irony, that ethical reasons would keep her from doing something she knew was right. But Paulsen had been hysterical, in no condition to make such a decision.

And there was the law, which drew lines between a fetus and a newborn child. It wouldn't care about her reasons. It wouldn't care that she would be sacrificing one life to spare another.

Andrea's nails clenched into her palms. She made herself think of the Paulsen fetus in the NICU. At sixteen weeks they might even keep it alive for a few days — long, cruel hopeless days. What had it done to deserve that kind of suffering? Whose fault was it that it had been "born"?

No, there wasn't, there had never really been, an alternative.

She had only wanted there to be.

Later that afternoon Andrea found herself in the west wing of the hospital, inside the premature section of the Neonatal ICU. She was tense. She hated this place, all places like it, ever since her rotation in neonatology when she was a second-year resident. It was then, watching those babies struggle for life, every breath forced into them by a machine, that she had decided to go into research on the artificial placentas.

There was a nurse bending over one of the units, checking the readout on a monitor. She looked up, recognizing Andrea.

"Doctor Newcomb, can I help you?"

Andrea stepped closer, reluctantly. "Doctor Feldman had a premature C-section this afternoon, didn't he? The Ruiz fetus, twenty weeks. I was wondering ..."

"Over here, Doctor."

Andrea steeled herself to peer into the incubator. She could have held the fetus, the newborn, in the palm of one hand if it hadn't been for the tubes and wires. It — no, it was visibly a female — she couldn't weigh as much as a pound.

The respirator hissed, forcing the baby's fragile ribcage to expand and contract. "You shouldn't be here," Andrea wanted to tell her. "You should be with me, where you belong."

The NICU was as good as any in the country. They would save her if they could, with as little damage as possible. But it was painful to stand and watch the struggle. Andrea had known it would be painful. It was why she had to come.

The pager pulsed. "Damn," she swore, low-voiced.

"Newcomb."

"Doctor, there's a lawyer named Eva Chaffey who'd like you to contact her. She says she's with the Women's Rights Council and she's representing the Paulsens."

Andrea acknowledged. So it was beginning already. The Paulsens were suing to terminate. Next the other side would gather its forces, draw the battle lines. Organized ideology would take over, and the fate of the Paulsen fetus would be their prize. The whole issue would go back to the courts, and the decision would affect the future of the whole program.

Instinctively, out of sympathy, Andrea wanted to side with the Paulsens. The FLS babies were fetuses, physiologically. But the effects of a legal precedent reached further than the original case. The purpose of the FLS program was to save lives, not terminate them.

Andrea left the NICU, but instead of finding a phone she went back to the FLS Unit. Noah Kim was waiting for her in the observation room.

"You always know where to find me, don't you?"

Kim shrugged. "I've known you long enough. They told me you were over in the west wing."

"It's starting already," she told him. "Lawyers. Lawsuits. The Paulsens want to terminate."

He rubbed her shoulders in sympathy. "Do you know what you're going to do?"

She shook her head. "I know what I'd like to do. But we've got to think of the program. It doesn't seem fair, but if we let the Paulsens terminate, what are we opening the door to?"

"Damn!" Her fists clenched painfully. "If only I'd ..."

Kim shook her. His round face was grave. "Don't blame yourself. I talked with Helen. It wasn't your fault. Listen, Andrea, don't start believing the magazine interviews. You can't save the whole world."

"No," she said glumly, "and sometimes you just make things worse."

They stood in the silence of the observation room. On the other side of the glass were the tanks, forty tiny beings floating in the red-shadowed warmth. Thirty-nine of them normal, as far as medical science could determine. And one other.

Andrea looked at the Paulsen tank and tried to visualize the Ruiz baby floating there instead of on the respirator in the NICU. Kim followed the direction of her eyes.

"No," he said, turning her face gently toward the other tanks. "Look this way." □

Mist Gathering By David Lunde

*In that day
there was wind, the stars
blew across the sky
like dry leaves, husks
of cicadas chirring
castaway flotsam
you could hear them
you could hear how they
rattled on the walls of space
choused like mustangs
from every continuum canyon
herded together
in panic stamped
and the mist came then
by wisp and tendril
swept like dust-bunnies
from the odd angles
of the universe, from under
the massive furniture of galaxies
black hole clutter and drift
blown by the strange wind
all to the center
thicker and thicker
hiding what happened there
you could not see past the magician's cloak
veil of the dancer
you could see only
the silent wind whirling
the mist thicker to drown
errant star-sparkle
and then nothing, nothing,*

nothing

*nothing beyond brightness
new brightness beginning*

Serving the Market

By Steve Benson

Art by Pat Morrissey

Something like a foot-long mosquito buzzed by. Modson dodged it, sending the wooden platform bobbing beneath his feet. "Damn!" he said, swatting at the beast. It ignored him, hovered for an instant, and then shot away over the brackish water.

The portable fan he aimed at his tanned face cooled him slightly while chasing away most of the gnats and bloodflies. He snorted the moldy stench out of his nose, trying to draw a clean breath of air. A fly struck the fan's blade, splattering over Modson's chin. He wiped it clean and spat.

Modson scanned the horizon of the swamp. Large islands floated in the foreground, riots of vegetation drifting on the algae-choked water. Occasionally something broke the oily surface, leapt toward an insect or bird. An animal-skin canoe bobbed at the endpost of the porch. But Modson saw nothing of what he hoped for.

"When's the next shuttle due?" he called over his shoulder.

His guide had disappeared inside the ramshackle floating waystation after securing the canoe. Modson's stomach growled as he struggled to gain his balance on the floating porch. Murky water swept across his wintings and he stepped back, trying to reach higher ground that wasn't there. Instead, he bumped into one of the trelliks.

"Oh, excuse me," Modson said, lowering his carrying case to the damp plank floor. The trellik stared up at him with blank eyes swimming in a gray face. "Ah, do you know when the next shuttle leaves?"

The trellik crossed his arms and cocked his head as if Modson were speaking a foreign language. Which he was. "Garfu?" Modson asked, switching to the local tongue.

"I spoke Ang-Glish," the trellik announced, managing to look even more annoyed.

"Oh, good," Modson said, wiping a cuff across his forehead. "Pal, the shuttle back to Grove Point ... when does it leave?"

"Left. Name no Pal. Name Lindo."

"I'm very happy for you, Lindo. But when does the next one leave?"

"Do not. One leaving left. No more."

"What do you mean 'No more'?" That's crazy," Modson told him. The guide came around the corner. Something small and green twitched in the corner of his mouth. Modson's hunger abruptly ended. "You. Snarf, or whatever your name is, when does the next shuttle leave?"

"Zabo name. No next shuttle." Zabo pulled the thing from his mouth and grinned at Modson. "You stuck." The trellik pointed at the wall behind Lindo's head. There was scribbling in the native hand which Modson could not decipher. Beside the writing a small tape player hung from a strap. The player's message light was blinking.

Modson stepped into the shack and pulled the machine free, making both trelliks jump. Pressing the small speaker to his ear, Modson heard: "Due to market shifts,

the Axman Corporation will cease trade with the sovereignties of Trell on the last day of the local week Karil. This corresponds with solar date AS342.08.14. All representatives of the Axman Corporation are to report to the base at Grove Point by ten-hundred hours on the aforementioned date for extraction. End of message." The player clicked off.

"What time is it?" Modson asked, clawing at his cuff. He succeeded in exposing his chronometer. "Seven-hundred hours. Good, we've got some time. Let's see, point zero eight point one five." He sagged. "One day late."

Zabo and Lindo exchanged curious glances. They jumped back as Modson jerked upright. "The handputer!" he cried. Zabo dodged to the left, Lindo to the right. Modson plowed through the doorway and landed flat-footed next to his display case. Green water swirled about his ankles as the porch submerged for a moment. Modson ignored it. He tore open the top of the case, sending order blanks flying.

He clawed the restraining flap back, exposing the top handputer. He yanked it out of the case so fast that he lost his grip on it. Spinning end over end, the small, gray rectangle arced through the humid air and landed with a thick plop in the mossy water.

A sharp grunt escaped Modson's lips. Modson started toward the canoe. The portable computer was floating about twelve feet from the porch. If he climbed into the canoe and stretched he could just about reach it. He stepped down into the canoe and then froze. Something in the water was playing with the handputer. It nudged the computer back and forth and then in circles. With a sharp crunch, the computer's shell splintered. A gray-green snout appeared where the computer met the water. The handputer came apart with a grinding of teeth.

Jumping away from the canoe, Modson pulled his carrying case closer to the waystation doorway. He tried to look away from the spot where the computer had submerged. Carefully, Modson lifted the next handputer free. He was about to switch the computer on when the water in front of the porch exploded.

A shiny, green tube thrashed about, foaming the water. It was about twice the thickness of Modson's biceps. Its teeth clashed, throwing sparks. After a few moments of fevered motion, the thing splashed flat into the water and slowly submerged.

"What was that?!"

"Aungwort," Zabo said, peeking around the doorway. "Never saw devil-worm dance before."

"Oh, God, get me out of here!" Modson said, fumbling with the handputer. He switched it on and dialed to function thirty-seven. The screen lit up with the question: WHAT FREQUENCY? Modson selected the SHOW FRE-



QUENCIES option. The screen shifted, displaying the pre-programmed frequencies already loaded into the computer's memory. Modson selected AXMAN EMERGENCY CHANNEL.

"You have reached the Axman Emergency Channel," a pleasant voice said. "State the nature of your emergency."

"I'm stranded," Modson said. He scanned the horizon, searching for some landmark to tell him exactly where he was. "I guess I'm about forty kilometers southeast of Grove Point. And there's weird things in the water."

"What is your name and title, sir?"

"My name is Dade R. Modson. My title is Outside Sales Representative."

Pause. "For which product line, Mr. Modson?"

"What the hell diff—," he snapped. His grip on the computer tightened and then eased a bit. "The Axman Handiputer Two Compact/Expanded."

Mr. Modson, are you aware that the product has been withdrawn from distribution?"

"Just get me out of here, all right?"

Pause. "Mr. Modson, I am authorized to tell you that a secondary extraction is planned for solar date AS342.08.16 at eight-hundred hours. This extraction has been planned for those of our sales force who were incapable of reaching Grove Point in time for the primary extraction."

"Great. Now how do I get from here to there?"

"By being resourceful, I would suppose," the voice said. "Be advised, Mr. Modson, failure to reach the extraction point by eight-hundred hours on the sixteenth will sever all connections between yourself and the Axman Corporation."

"You mean you'd just strand me here?"

"Speaking off the record, Mr. Modson, the Axman Corporation lost money during its engagements with the trelliks, even though the dirty little bastards pay in precious stones. We're sitting on over two hundred thousand of the H2CEs. We tried other products with equally pale results."

"What kind of products?"

"It's of no consequence," the voice said. "All you need to know is these people just do not want computers."

"But I sold three just this week!" Modson told the voice, but the connection was already broken. He shook a small bag of emeralds and rubies, as if showing it to the computer. "You're crazy. All you have to do is properly identify the market...." He switched the handiputer off and slipped it back in the case. Zabo was chomping something even more vile. "How fast can you paddle that canoe?" Modson asked. The trellik offered him a confused look. "I have to get to Grove Point!"

"Fast?" Lindo asked, his black eyes sparkling. He moved further into the shack, signalling that he wanted Modson to follow. Several things squealed and leapt aside as the pair moved into the depths of the shanty. The floor canted as they moved toward the far wall. Green water spurted up from between the boards.

"Is this safe?" Modson asked, trying not to look down as something furry burrowed beneath a pile of debris directly to his left. Lindo swung a thatched door open onto water. He stepped through. Modson followed cautiously. "A boat!" he announced, looking out at the small native standing in an aluminum rowboat. "And a motor! Where

did you get this?" he asked.

"Traded many shiny-stones," Lindo said, beaming with pride. "This go fast."

"I'll bet it does," Modson said, stepping into the doorway. "Give me a minute to get my case and we'll head out."

"Wait. What trade?"

"I don't understand."

"For boat ride. What trade?"

"Oh," Modson said, leaning against the flimsy doorway. He had a quarter pound of precious gems in his case. "How about a handiputer?"

Lindo made a face.

"Now wait a minute," Modson said, holding up a hand. "The Axman Handiputer Two Compact/Expanded is without a doubt the finest tool ever created by the hand of man. It is a self-standing unit capable of storing over twelve-thousand megabytes of files as well as" Lindo's face hadn't changed. "All right, what do you want?"

"Want krow-no-meet-ter."

"My watch?" Modson asked. Lindo's head bobbed as he grinned through sharp teeth. "No way. Do you know what this thing cost me?"

"Is this as fast as this thing will go?" Modson asked. He absently rubbed his naked wrist.

"Go fast," Lindo agreed.

"Wheeee!" Zabo announced. The small native sat in the bow, joyfully allowing the thick spray to wash his gray face.

The boat rasped against something, bounced twice and settled down. "What was that?" Modson asked, clutching his display case.

"Aungwort," Lindo said, looking over his shoulder. In the boat's wake, something dark and sinuous rose, thrashing.

"Another one? This place is lousy with them!"

"All over Trell," Lindo said. He shrugged. "Part of food-rope."

"You mean food-chain?" Modson shuddered, pulling his jacket tighter against the cooling air. He scratched an itch at the back of his neck and came away with a bloodfly squashed between his fingers. "I'll be glad to get out of this particular food-chain once and for all!"

How much further?" Modson wailed, holding his case more tightly. The engine's monotonous drone had numbed his senses.

"Bit more," Lindo said; the same answer he had given each time during the past ninety minutes. They were skirting a large floating island when a ball of fire exploded to the right, cutting through the twilight.

A harsh voice echoed over the water, speaking trell. Modson caught none of it. He strained to spot the source of the fire, but in the diminishing light he could see nothing but silhouettes. Lindo leaned against the outboard, sending the boat bouncing toward the sputtering ball of fire.

"What's going on?" Modson asked.

"Laroti," Zabo said, peering into the darkness ahead. He looked over his shoulder at Modson. "You call pie rats."

"Pie rats? No, not pirates," Modson said. "Grove Point, remember? That way." He pointed off into the dark.

Lindo shrugged. "Pie rat say come or kill quick like long bang."



"Long bang?" Modson asked. Another ball of fire erupted from the island ahead. It skipped across the water, hissing where it struck the surface. The fireball thumped into a moss bank, sizzling as it shot sparks into the air.

"Kill quick long bang," Zabo said, bouncing in the front of the boat.

Modson unsnapped the side panel of his case. His hand snaked inside, caressed a smooth, cool handgrip. In five years of selling situations he had only had to pull *The Persuader* once. That had been a dozen light-years away and he hadn't fired it since. As the boat drew closer, Modson saw a group of figures standing at the edge of the floating island. A campfire flickered in the background. Several of the silhouettes were carrying weapons. Even at this distance, Modson recognized the distinctive lines of a Starfire Plasmajet rifle. He slowly withdrew his hand from the case.

"Conco rotti!" one of the pirates called. Lindo cut the engine, letting the boat drift. A rope landed across the bow. Zabo grabbed it, started pulling them toward the soggy shore.

Modson recognized about half of the weapons. Some were projectile weapons, others were beam rifles. All of them were pointing at him. At least now he knew what other products Axman Corporation had been test-marketing on Trell.

Modson stepped out of the boat behind Zabo. Lindo tarried, tying the boat up. "Dibbu rotti!" the voice commanded.

Lindo shuddered, jumping back from the boat. A thin strand of plasma cut the darkness, exploding into a point of flame where Lindo had been standing only a second earlier.

Several of the trelliks gathered around Modson. "You leave no?" one of them asked.

"I'm trying to," Modson said, pulling his case closer to his right leg.

"Human!" a deep voice called. "Human 'puter-seller! Oh, good-good, Ophu want speak at you." A tall trellik came out of the darkness. This one was carrying another Starfire and had a belt of phosphorus grenades over one shoulder.

"You'd like to buy, er, invest in a handputer?" Modson asked, hopefully.

"Got one," Ophu said, swiveling his right hip forward to show the small computer dangling there. "Don't work." Modson's heart sank.

"Where did you get the rifle?" Modson asked.

"Other human. Like you but no smell as bad," the big trellik said. He slapped a dirty hand against the plasmarifle. "This work good. 'Puter no work. You fix."

"What's wrong with it?" he asked.

Ophu shrugged. "Kaslu pho nariu," he said, slapping a wide hand against the machine.

The other pirates laughed and Lindo translated, "Says poor workmanship."

"Did you read the manual?"

Ophu's eyes grew large as he leaned closer. "It no work! You unnerstan?"

Modson forced a smile and asked, "Would you like me to replace it? I've got a couple of brand new units right here." He reached for his case.

The big trellik swung the barrel of the Starfire around.

"No trust you. You human lying-type sold Ophu bad-thing begin with. No replace. Fix."

"You have to understand something, Ophu. I am not an authorized repair technician for this unit. If you fill out the warranty card...."

"No card! No war on tee," Ophu snarled. A bead of light was growing at the end of the Starfire. Ophu had slipped off the safety and was allowing the primary coil to charge.

"In that case, simply return the sales receipt to the point of pur ... no, that won't work either, will it?" Modson's mind raced. His eyes moved from Ophu to the boat and back again. Even if he got Ophu with a clean shot from *The Persuader* the rest of the pirates would be on him in a second. What about the water? There was something about the water that might help if only he could get his thoughts organized.

"Fix!"

"Give it to me," Modson snapped. Ophu blinked and stepped forward. He allowed the barrel of the Starfire to drop toward the matted ground.

Modson watched as the native unhooked the strap and handed over the handputer. Modson hefted it by the strap and looked Ophu straight in the eyes. He switched it on. "Do you know what these things are best suited for? I'll bet the guy who sold you this didn't even tell you what they can do, did he?"

"What? What tell!"

Modson swung the handputer over his head once and let it fly toward the water. All heads turned to watch the 'puter as it arced through the darkness and dropped with a thick plop into the water.

"Hey!" Ophu said, looking back and forth between Modson and his handputer bobbing on the surface.

"Now watch!" Modson said. He yanked *The Persuader* free of its holster. Ophu started bringing up the Starfire's barrel but before he could fire, Modson twisted the diffusion lens of *The Persuader* all the way to the right. He pointed the wide barrel toward the water and pulled the trigger. A cone of brilliant yellow light spilled across the shore, the boat, and the handputer beyond.

"My 'puter!" Ophu wailed.

"Watch!" Modson repeated, holding the beam steady. The water was black as oil in *The Persuader's* beam. After a few seconds, something tugged at the bottom of the handputer, making it splash. The tugging increased and finally a set of teeth exploded out of the brackish depths, enclosing the unit. The aungwort's jaws came three feet out of the water, swallowing the handputer whole.

With a splintering sound, the handputer came apart in the aungwort's throat. Electricity crackled and sparks flew from the beast's teeth. It thrashed about for a moment and then flopped down into the water. A thin cloud of blue smoke rose from the ruined aungwort.

"Gentlemen, you have just witnessed the world's finest aungwort trap," Modson said, switching off *The Persuader* as all attention swung away from the water. "No more do you have to fear the filthy buggers lurking beneath the water. Simply toss one of these —" he held up one of the computers — "in the water and the aungwort simply cannot resist the signal. It swallows the handputer and zap, no more aungwort! Now I only have a few of these remaining, so who's going to be the first to purchase one of these little beauties?"

When the pushing and shoving finally stopped, Ophu

was at the head of the line.

That's right, Axman Base Control, I said all two hundred thousand units," Modson said into the handiputer. He had saved one of them for himself. He knew that he wouldn't make it to Grove Point by noon, but that hardly mattered now.

"If this is some kind of joke," the operator said, "you'll really be in trouble."

"Listen, the people here have already thrown, er, used over a thousand of their handiputers to great advantage and they want more!"

"Have you been consuming controlled substances?"

"Sir, you should speak to the next vice president in charge of marketing with more respect. It was just a matter of properly identifying the market," Modson said. "In fact, what is your name?"

"Ah, I'm processing the request for product right now." The line went dead.

Modson switched off the handiputer and sat back in the hammock. He was back at Lindo's shack. The small native had mixed up a batch of some drink which wasn't half bad considering what had gone into it.

"Everything's going to work out just fine," Modson said. He emptied his cup, felt the liquid fire trailing down his throat. "Just fine." He winked at Zabo.

The trellik tried to wink back, closed both eyes, and stumbled against the rough doorway. "Explain districk sales mangle again," Zabo said, rubbing his head.

"Dat's me!" Lindo said, appearing in the doorway with another bucket of the potent drink. He poured a round of

drinks, looked up at Modson, and said, "What am districk sales mangle again?"

"You work for me on Trell, taking orders and making sure everything goes smoothly," Modson said. "For that you get a cut of the profits."

"Cut proficks!" Lindo said. "Drink up!" All three of them emptied their glasses. "Cut proficks! Dat's me!"

"But what about kiju barroo?" Zabo asked.

"Oh, it doesn't taste that bad," Modson said, holding up his cup for more.

Lindo giggled. "No, not dolo juice!"

"The bottom-sliders," Zabo translated. "Big lurkers. Everybody knows. Feed on aungwort. If not for aungwort the kiju barroo come up."

"Yeah, come up!" Lindo agreed.

Something huge rubbed against the bottom of the shack. Boards moaned at the pressure. The porch lurched roughly to the left, spilling Modson out onto the water-logged planks. Modson asked, "Was that what I think it was?"

Both trelliks nodded, shuddering. The shack continued to complain as the kiju barroo pushed from below. Struggling to keep his balance on the shifting planks, Modson switched on the handiputer. Shiny, black islands of flesh were rising and falling all around the shack.

"Axman Base, this is Modson again." Green water swirled around his knees as the shack came apart. "Yes, I think I've identified another market." He scrambled onto a floating beam, gyrating to keep the handiputer out of the water. "About those Starfire plasmarifles ... do they come in extra-large?" □

A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

We think he did a fine job at *Galileo*, and, in fact, it was on the strength of that performance that we picked him to help turn *Aboriginal Science Fiction* into the first successful SF magazine in a decade.

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Given the Game

By Daniel Keys Moran

Art by Charles Lang

Dawn of the last day was clear. The sun lifted up over the hills to the east just before seven a.m. Down on the beach, Costigan knelt in the sand with the sun to his back, his shadow striking out over the ocean in the long low light of morning.

When he had finished praying, Costigan rose, picked up his weapons, and began dressing. The forest here reached down toward the beach, a strip of sand fifty meters wide separated the water and the trees. Costigan glanced briefly at the locator; his opponent was still two squares away on the grid. The opponent — Costigan thought it was probably the Latino named Roseleaf — would be here within an hour at the outside.

He made the rounds of his booby traps, and prepared to wait.

It was the last day, and finally, thank God finally, the Game was nearly over.

In the darkness near Tau Ceti, God heard their distant prayers, the music of the water creatures. It listened to their exquisite pain, to the tales they sang of death in the nets, death brought by the water-fouling, weapon-carrying, net-wielding land creatures.

The Game was well under way at Tau Ceti. The natives were a squat, slow-moving race with little natural propensity toward violence. God hardly cared; they were Players nonetheless, and if the being who won the Game at Tau Ceti was less formidable than the victors of other Games, so be it. The Game had been old when God was young, in a time when the universe itself had been hotter and smaller; God had Played many thousands of species, and its early rages at Games that went poorly had long since vanished.

God was old, and It handled disappointment well.

The Game at Tau Ceti would finish itself. Late in 1962, God ignited the fusion fires in the belly of Its home, and began the long journey to the water world called Earth.

It was, the government said, an alien ship. That was during the first week, while the ship was still outside the orbit of Jupiter, decelerating toward an Earth orbit. Humanity wondered at God's approach, that first week, until the relativistic effects of God's long journey had shrunk to the point that God and humanity experienced time at the same speed.

And God Spoke.

The Line was silent. It hardly mattered; for months now Costigan had hardly noticed the Line when it did speak to him. The voice of God had been growing quieter for a long time now. Costigan didn't know for sure how long. His sense of time had vanished — well, some time ago.

He sat up in the top of a redwood. Roseleaf — or D'Amato, if D'Amato had survived, which Costigan did not think likely — would be coming by either plane or helicopter; nothing else moved as fast as the locator said

his opponent was coming. Costigan had prepared for that eventuality; he was set up with a marksman's rifle and heat-seeking anti-aircraft artillery he'd taken from March Air Force Base after killing Gifford Kirkwood there. He didn't really think God was going to let him blow his opponent out of the air, but it was worth his while to make the attempt.

Costigan waited. When the blip that was the sole remaining human being on Earth entered the locator's central square, he dropped the locator, let it fall like a stone to the forest's floor, thirty meters below. The opponent had entered the arena, and would not leave it again unless Costigan was dead. At close range the locator was useless; dead weight. Let it go.

Let it go.

The last thing that Martin Costigan remembered from the world before the Game was a live broadcast where two evangelists were arguing over whether the aliens — if they were aliens — had souls. If they had souls, the evangelists wondered, were the souls of the same type as human souls? Could they be saved in Jesus like a human?

And on and on.

Martin Costigan was drinking coffee and thinking quite calmly that if the likes of the two on his television screen were allowed to have souls then he, for one, was not going to disqualify anything out of hand, when the Line came bursting down into his skull.

He crawled back to consciousness slowly. He lay face down on the living room rug. The back of his skull was throbbing as though it had been split by a cleaver. Without shifting position he reached up with his right hand and touched the back of his head. There was no blood, no wound; just hair that had not been cut recently enough.

He sat up slowly, numb with shock. He watched the television screen for a moment without comprehension. One of the evangelists, the short, rather chubby one, had the older silver-haired one down on the floor and was methodically bashing his brains out against the cement of the sound stage. Off-camera Martin heard the sound of gunshots, and a dull roaring mob sound that was quickly replaced by individual screams.

There was sound upstairs, and Martin turned away from the television screen. He heard his wife's footstep on the stairs, and suddenly understood the scene on the television. With the old reflexes he found the nearest weapon, picked up their coffee table and threw it at Caroline as she entered the living room. She was carrying their .38 revolver; she managed two shots before the coffee table crushed her chest.

Neither of the shots struck Martin. He took the revolver from Caroline's outstretched hand and went back

upstairs. The twins, Tina and Sharon, were fighting in bed. Both of them had nasty scratches but did not seem to have harmed one another otherwise. Martin shoved them apart, shot Tina in the forehead as she lay on the bed, and then shot Sharon twice in the chest as she was picking up a stuffed animal to throw at him.

Then he went into his son's bedroom and killed Timmy. Timmy did better than the twins; he struck Martin with a baseball bat as Martin entered his bedroom. It left a nasty bruise the next day. Martin took the baseball bat away from his son and beat him to death with it.

Martin stood over the broken, almost unrecognizable shape of his child, and for the first time there came a voice over the Line, and the voice was God and God shouted in terror and death and insanity, and in the madness of Its words It said, *Well done.*

A first Costigan was not certain whether the sound was real. He brought his binoculars to his eyes and scanned the treetops to the south, the direction from which the locator had said his opponent was coming.

Southwest; a glint of metal in the sun. He must have been following the coast, as close to the sacred water as Instinct would let him get. He was surrendering any real chance of surprising Costigan in exchange for assurance that he would still be able to find Costigan if his plane failed and he had to make a landing before he arrived. That was a very real possibility. The Game was twelve years old, and finding anything that still worked after twelve years of utter neglect was rare.

Except weapons. Where there had been people, weapons had been cared for.

Costigan followed the glint of light as it approached. Cessna, he noted, a single-engine Cessna 182; not military aircraft after all. That did not surprise him; the Cessna was one of the most trustworthy planes ever built.

It looked as though the plane was going to pass within a kilometer of Costigan's tree. Costigan lifted the rocket launcher to his shoulder and activated the sights. A flashing red dot followed the Cessna for a moment on the display and then stabilized. In the lower right hand corner of the display, the words *Locked On* flashed bright green. Costigan tried to pull the trigger. Nothing. His finger would not move. God was not going to let things end so simply; Costigan had not expected It to. He sighed, touched the snapclasp that held the rocket launcher's restraining strap around his shoulders, and dropped the launcher to the forest floor.

Let it go.

The Cessna buzzed north, losing altitude. Costigan estimated; two kilometers to landing. Yes. He was going to use the airstrip that the National Guard had built just before the Game began.

He climbed methodically down the tree, to the leaf-strewn floor of the forest. It was autumn, and getting chilly. Costigan wished it were winter. People made bad decisions when they were cold.

He checked his weapons one more time before heading north.

The first year following God's arrival was easily the worst.

Costigan could not even guess how many people died that year. At its end only a fraction of a percent of the

humans on Earth were still alive; two million people, maybe three. The cities died within days; within the first week they were pits of disease that only the suicidal entered. Bodies rotted everywhere. Why nobody set the bombs off was anybody's guess; Costigan did not know. Perhaps God had prevented it. Perhaps, Costigan thought once, and smiled his only smile of the twelve years of the Game, perhaps they had simply been lucky.

Surviving the first year was largely a matter of luck. Costigan lived in a small mountain village on the west slopes of the California Rockies. His nearest neighbors were over two kilometers away. He had time to prepare before those who survived the first couple of days came hunting. He was different, he understood clearly; a human with the force of will to control the Instinct to the degree that he could wait, and force the others to come to him, to fight on his territory.

He was the only vet within forty kilometers who had actually seen combat. It gave him an edge; that and great luck let him survive the first year.

And he learned.

The lake, less than a kilometer south of the National Guard airstrip, was new; it had not been there only a few months prior. By now Costigan no longer found the appearance of one of the salt-water lakes anything to remark upon. If the lakes had any relevance to the Game, he was unable to determine what it might be. It had been many years since he had given it any thought.

The machines that built them were slick, steel-gray, almost living. They could not truly be alive in any animal sense; Costigan had never felt the desire to kill one.

Costigan detoured, avoided the lake without anything approaching a conscious decision.

It was during the second year of the Game that the locators appeared. Costigan awoke in the middle of the night after something set off one of his perimeter warnings. The locator was sitting next to his H&K 91. The first time he saw it he knew how to use it.

He had killed over a thousand people by that time; others who had survived this long had compiled similar records. Humans were becoming scarce. The wildlife population was exploding. By the end of the second year, Costigan thought there were probably more deer than humans left on the face of the Earth.

The locators speeded things up. Within the immediate surroundings they were useless; inside a circle of three kilometers or so they no longer tracked. Outside three kilometers but within, Costigan guessed, a hundred and fifty, they gave an accurate placement of all living humans. The first time he had used the locator, there had been four humans within eighty kilometers distance. Costigan tracked them down and killed them, and each time God spoke through the Line, and said, *Well done.*

Never again were there that many humans within range of the locator at once.

Summer came again, and then winter, and the Game continued. Three and a half years into the Game Costigan realized that he had not seen a woman in almost two dozen kills. He tried to remember what that woman had looked like, and could not. He could not remember Caroline's face either, when he tried, or the faces of any of the women he had known and loved from before. He

entered a small town after the locator told him it was empty, and entered the remains of a small liquor store. Most of the liquor and all of the food was gone. There were three skeletons within. Costigan ignored them and searched through the piles of garbage until he found what he wanted. It was an old magazine, a news magazine or something like it, from before. He opened it and leafed through it, read the pages and looked at the pictures of the men and women. There was a fashion pictorial near the center of the magazine, and one of the models, a slim, dark-haired girl, stirred the remote awareness of desire within Costigan, and before he realized what he was doing he flung the magazine away from himself, unsling his H&K 91 and fired into the magazine, held down the trigger until the H&K's entire clip had been expended.

Without pause he yanked the ammo clip out of the H&K and replaced it with a fresh clip, ran out of the liquor store, and ran until he had left the town entirely, with tears streaming silently down his face the entire time.

Costigan lay flat on his belly, in the brown grass at the edge of the airfield. The Cessna was down, engine killed, parked by the fuel pumps. With the binoculars Costigan scanned the air field, the Guard's barracks buildings, the administration buildings. There was nothing.

He lowered the binoculars slowly, thoughtfully.

Once, for a brief while, when the Game had slowed unacceptably, the Line had answered questions. There were less than a thousand humans still alive then, all men. Costigan did not know how the others had used their time with God, and did not care; he spent his studying the competition. He had learned everything that God was willing or able to tell him about his opponents. If the one called Roseleaf had flown the Cessna in, then he would be dug in down at the beach, with the water at his back, with a couple of mines planted in the sand for good measure. If D'Amato had won their battle then D'Amato would be ...

Costigan frowned, and crawled swiftly backward through the grass, into the cover of trees. He brought himself to his feet, and began circling the buildings. At one point the tree cover moved to within eighty meters of the Cessna and the fuel pumps. He pulled the pin from a therm grenade and without pause threw sidehanded. Two seconds later the grenade went off in an airburst five meters above its target.

The Cessna went up immediately, burning. The flames took a moment to spread to the fuel tanks. The tanks must have been dry, or nearly so, after twelve years; the explosion was modest. It took out the barracks immediately, and the firestorm that followed razed the administration buildings within minutes.

Costigan waited, without hope, until the entire airport had burned to the ground. It was mid-afternoon by then. Only after he was sure, when he was certain that he had not killed anyone, when the *Well done* came not, did he leave the airport, and go down to the beach.

The final years were strange, grim and meaningless beyond any words Costigan could find to describe them. It surprised him sometimes how good he had become at killing; in boot his DI had called him a collection of parts that didn't work too well alone and even worse all

at once.

Much of it was luck, always luck. In any contest where two men sought to kill each other, one or neither would survive; strictly by the odds the chances were a little worse than two to one against Costigan on any particular occasion. But the population base that he started from was huge; simply by the odds some had to win, and win, and win.

Most of it was skill. Those who survived were masters of death, the lords of shadow. As time progressed, the Game became less hunting, and more a matter of art; it ceased to be slaying and became the Kill.

After the first five years Costigan stopped thinking about it. Sometime in the eighth year he stopped thinking.

Let it go.

At the end of the decade Costigan encountered his first samurai. He lost some of the muscle from his left bicep that time; he was so sure the samurai was dead after taking an entire stomachful of armor-piercing slugs that he hesitated slightly to check his locator before re-loading. It took an entire second clip from the H&K 91 before the samurai stopped moving. The circle was shrinking; in the following year Costigan killed Orientals and Europeans and Latinos with increasing regularity. He thought there was probably nobody left on the other continents. He thought sometimes that God was bringing his opponents to him, because he alone was able to wait for them, to deny the need to kill long enough.

Just long enough.

Now it was the last day, and the Line was silent; God absent.

Costigan made his way cautiously, carefully, wearily, down to the edge of the beach. The beach looked deserted, utterly empty. Costigan ghosted along the edge of the tree line, examining the sand, for one kilometer, two ...

There. Costigan could not have explained to anyone, even himself, how he knew that that faint rise in the sand, no different in shape from any other patch of sand on the beach, held a human being. He felt it. He unsling his H&K, leaned it carefully against the side of a fir pine. He took an incendiary and a frag grenade from his dwindling supply, pulled the pins and lobbed them, one after the other. He had his H&K 91 in hand and was charging across the sand the instant the fragmentation burst subsided. He fired as he ran, used a clip and reloaded, and then he was there. The sand had baked into glass from the therm grenade; the frag and his bullets had shattered the glass into tiny shards. Costigan plunged his hands into the fragments of sand glass, which was already assuming a dark red shade, found the form of a man, and yanked him up, into the air.

Costigan stared in disbelief. Wearing oxygen gear, with his hands cuffed behind his back, was the freshly dead body of the Italian Jorgi D'Amato. He hardly had time to comprehend this when a sledgehammer smashed into his hunched back, sent him rolling across the sand. He continued rolling, over the edge of the dry sand and down an incline toward the holy water. He scrambled desperately to a halt before he touched the water, filled with a primitive terror, and ran, crouched low, as automatic fire continued to strike around him. He reached the relative safety of a low outcropping of rock, jutting up out of the water, and let gravity take him to the ground in the



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shortest possible route. He struck the rock hard.

He took stock of his situation. Roseleaf, of course. Peering over the edge of his meager cover he saw nothing up on the beach but D'Amato's remains. Each breath was torture; even impact-resistant underwear was not meant to stop heavy-duty slugs for long. Something had gone through, or else the impact had shoved a rib splinter into a lung; perhaps both. Costigan could feel blood in his lungs.

"Corst-ah-gahn!"

Roseleaf was speaking. In twelve years Costigan could not recall that having happened; could not recall an attempt at communication.

"This is Rossli, Corst-ah-gahn. Surrender!" The voice came from — there. North and east, 150 meters. Heavy copse of trees. "Surrender and I will let you live!" Costigan estimated the probable drop for firing from this distance. "I can do this, you have seen it in Damato. The Game, Corst-ah-gahn, that is all the aly-an cares about. Surrender and I will win and you can continue to live!"

Three and a half clips were left to Costigan. Call it five seconds, he thought clinically. He pulled the half clip out of the H&K 91 and replaced it with a full clip. "Corst-ah-gahn! Do ..."

Costigan fired, the entire clip. Pull clip load and fire pull clip load and fire pull clip load.

He was up and running. He had half a clip left. Roseleaf was not returning fire, and he reached the safety of the trees. Breathing was fire, and he kept running through the trees, flipped the switch on the H&K to single-shot to conserve ammunition.

Something struck him as he was approaching the spot where Roseleaf had been, slammed him back into the trees. He staggered to his feet again, moved to the right. His left elbow was smashed. There was a flicker of movement ahead, and he fired a single round toward it. He kept moving, found himself in a clearing suddenly, and reversed direction in panic. Automatic fire crashed through the clearing, missing him, and he kept moving, back toward the beach. He saw something brown and gray, moving parallel to him, and he cut through brush, went charging after the elusive form, and once again had a brief glimpse of the figure. Then the form was gone, and in the afterimage on his retina Costigan saw Roseleaf, a small man, smaller than Costigan had imagined, a 1,100 rounds-per-minute MAC-10 clutched in his right hand. He was holding his neck with his left hand, and a dark familiar stain was flooding down over his left shoulder.

Costigan followed him, close on his trail. The form appeared and vanished and appeared again, and vanished. Costigan turned the select switch to full auto and fired everything he had left to the last spot he had seen a flash of brown-gray camouflage clothing.

Abruptly there was silence. Costigan was counting, one, two, three —

Roseleaf was behind him. Costigan knew without knowing how. He dropped, and fire traced through the air over his head. He rolled to the side, arms over his neck and skull, and the fire struck him again and again, smashing his legs and ribs. The last thing he remembered was reaching for a grenade. One of the grenades came free, and he pulled the pin one-handed and threw without the faintest idea where he was throwing.

He was caught in his own blast.

There was blood in his mouth. His legs were numb, though he could still move them slightly. He crawled, with the one arm that he could get to work, pushing and pulling himself along the ground. There was a prone gray form, blasted cleanly out of the cover of the woods, back out onto the sand. Costigan moved forward, pushed Roseleaf over onto his back and looked at the man's face. The man's left eye was missing and he was bleeding from a nick that he had taken in the side of his neck, but he was still breathing. Costigan reached for his knife; gone. He could not remember what had happened to it. He searched around in the sand until he found a fair-sized stone. He brought the rock up with all the grace with which Cain must have killed Abel, and brought it down again and again until Roseleaf's brains were spread across the sand.

Costigan dropped the stone, and propped himself up against the bole of a tree. The Game was over.

The voice of God said softly, distantly, *Well done.* Costigan nodded. He was having trouble breathing. The numbness was creeping up into his chest. His legs would not move at all now.

There was silence again over the Line, and then the voice said gently, *How do you feel?*

At first Costigan could not comprehend the question. Then he answered with the only answer he had. *Death. I am all death.*

There was a distinct flavor of approval. *Will you join me now?*

Costigan did not answer. The world was very quiet. It was a calm autumn day, still warm. The air smelled very nice, like pines, when the wind did not blow him the scent of Roseleaf's blood. And the ocean was blue, and serene.

The ocean was stirring.

Costigan stared down at the water. It was heaving, rippling in a thousand sharp waves. The shapes were almost insectile as they came up out of the water, smooth gray, encased in alien metal.

God, he whispered into the Line, *why?*

What damage was due them? They did not understand, so We did not play them. They could not have competed, so We did not allow it. Unlike you, unlike Us. They are not Players, they do not understand the Game. You were like Us as children, Players of wondrous potential. Should We not have Played you?

But why —

There was a flicker of a smile in the back of Costigan's mind, the taste of primordial anger and ancient amusement, followed by a brief flash of God's countenance, of rows upon rows of crystalline sharp teeth. *Now they have hands, said God. Now they will learn to Play. And when they have practiced long enough, We will return for them. And give them the Game.*

Darkness descended upon Costigan. *Death is not a game. Death is not ...*

All things are the Game. Join Us. Let it go.

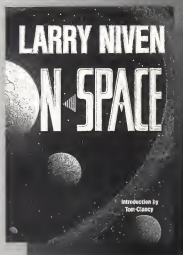
Costigan released his body.

Behind him the dolphins were coming up out of the ocean. □

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